

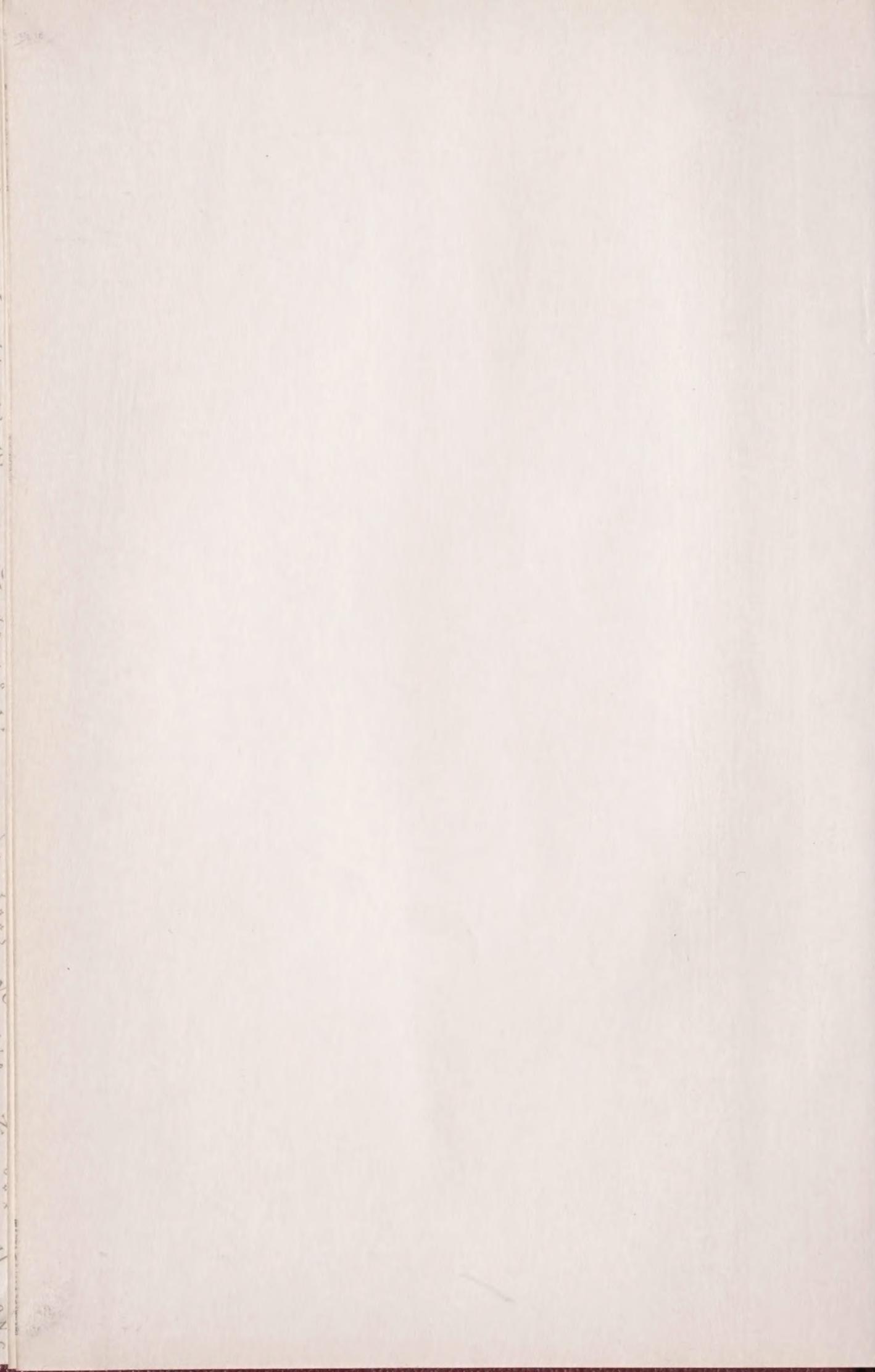
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The Shield of His Honor

A NOVEL

BY

COL. RICHARD HENRY SAVAGE

Author of

"My Official Wife," "An Exile From London"



NEW YORK
THE HOME PUBLISHING COMPANY
3 EAST FOURTEENTH STREET



THE SHIELD OF HIS HONOR

A NOVEL.

BY ✓

COL. RICHARD HENRY SAVAGE

AUTHOR OF

"MY OFFICIAL WIFE," "AN EXILE FROM
LONDON," ETC., ETC.

RICHARD HENRY SAVAGE

35

"Love's wings are over fleet,
And, like the panther's feet,
The feet of Love!"

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.



NEW YORK

THE HOME PUBLISHING COMPANY.

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THE SHIELD OF HIS HONOR

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THE SHIELD OF HIS HONOR.

BOOK I.

PRINCE CHARMING.

CHAPTER I.

ADRIFT ON LIFE'S OCEAN.

Marie Kriloff turned wearily from the windows of her drawing-room as the great bell of the Kazan Cathedral boomed out through the darkness the hour of nine. "He will be here soon," she whispered. "What can he have to tell me?" Touching a silver bell, she turned to old Elia, the butler, standing there mutely before her: "Light up the library, Elia," the lonely girl slowly said; "and if Counselor Weinstock calls, show him in! Say that I will receive him."

"Barina," entreated the silver-haired servitor; "the samovar is ready. It is already waiting half an hour."

The black-robed orphan only answered by a wave of her hand, though she could see the pleading face of Marie Alexandrowna peering over the old man's shoulder.

She turned again to the window! There was no light in the two great drawing-rooms whose vast solitude took up half the frontage of the old house, only a glimmering taper being suspended, in a silver lamp, before the gold and silver splendors of the icon in the corner.

And so, the gay gallants dashing along the Italianskaia toward the evening delights of the opera, the circus, and the salons of fashion, never saw that grace-

ful figure lingering there, a somber-robed Queen of Night.

Without, the March night was cold and keen; the far-distant silvery planets gleamed pale in the thin ether; the blue North star shone down pitilessly on the vast snow-covered Russian plains; the gloomy forest, and the ice-bound Venice of the North.

The winter night was as lonely without as in the other years of her girlhood when the silent watcher had looked down upon the tenantless Place Michel.

Nothing visible now save a few squalid isvostchiks huddled around the corners of the square. There was the red glow of the wooden fires melting the flinty snow-drifts; the furred police hovered in sheltering doorways, and, at the corner, a squad of four silent Cossacks sat mounted, their lance heads gleaming cruelly in the pale, reflected light of the stars.

If there was light and life in Petersburg on this wintry night, it was hidden behind doubled windows, cotton padded, and solidly barred shutters, for the icy blasts of Lake Ladoga whistled down the Neva and chilled the poor wretches bundled in their sheepskins, the beggars who haunted the warm entrances of café and restaurant.

The jingling sleighs dashed along, the burly coachmen's beards matted with the ice from their breaths, and the sentinels on the square were changed every fifteen minutes before the huge pillar of Alexander the First.

Suddenly, Marie Kriloff felt a rude, but loving embrace as her nurse, Marie Alexandrowna, half dragged her into the lighted dining-hall. The orphan yielded, but she shuddered as she passed the center table whereon, upon a silken cushion, reposed the dozen of gleaming orders and decorations of the late Baron Demetrius Kriloff, member of the Conseil d'Etat, Privy Councilor, etc.

As the lonely woman crossed the silent hall, she saw two huge silver salvers on a stand, heaped with the visiting cards of half the dignitaries of the Russian world of statecraft, letters and art, as well as the intertwined noblesse.

The great clock ticking away, with a hollow sound, alone disturbed that artificial hush which follows in the well-regulated household, the taking away of the dead.

With a passive resignation, the girl of nineteen took her place at the family table, where she now sat alone, surrounded by a row of vacant chairs. It was but a friendly, dumb show, the sipping of a tiny cup of tea—the crumbling of a piroski—for the buxom waiting-woman stood there watching fondly over her darling, with muttered prayers and fond exclamations of “Golubtchik, my dove and heart—my little mother—our angel.” A lonely orphan in a desolate home!

It was with a choking sob that Marie Kriloff started as the front door sonnette rang shrilly, startling the echoes of the house of mourning.

Around the vacant table, the lonely woman seemed to see again the faces of the dear departed—the graceful careworn mother of her childish days, her gallant brother Serge, handsome in his first uniform of the Chevalier Garde; the two little cherub sisters, Olga and Natalie, blossoms who had faded all too early in this arctic Paris, and the well-remembered form of her dreamy, intellectual father—the man whose guardian angel she had been for the three years since leaving the Catherine Institute.

Marie had not time to call the roll of the absent—the proud, patient mother, who, for twenty years, had labored to stem a tide of placid, shiftless extravagance, and had carried a heart, broken by her husband's feebly directed projects, to the only rest she had ever known—the grave.

Gallant Serge now lay far away buried under the sand dunes of Geok Tepe, where he led on Skobeleff's mad chivalry; and the little sisters had been untimely swept away, while the slim Marie was yet in short frocks at the institute.

But the last—her father—the gentle, vacuous, refined old dreamer—her only companion and friend—it was but a few days ago that he sat there in that very chair, confiding to his only child the latest of his brilliant but elusive schemes.

With a sigh, Marie lived over the nine days of death

in life, which had followed the pompous funeral, at which, deputations of every leading society and public body of note had honored the memory of that remarkable intellect, Demetrius Alexandrovitch, Baron Kriloff.

With a shrinking dignity, the orphan had declined the offered courtesies of a score of ladies of rank, ardent in their first sympathy to share her solitude until the arrival of Madame Xenie Karovitch, her only relative, who was now hastening from Odessa to the side of her bereaved niece.

"Thank Heaven, Barina Xenie comes soon," muttered the warm-hearted nurse emeritus, as Marie Kriloff glided into the library.

For old Elia, standing as erect as in his soldier days, had presented the card of the visitor. He had frowned as he read the words: "Matthias Weinstock, Conseiller et Avocat, 16 Posadskaya, Petersbourgsky Ostrov."

And both the wise Elia and the thrifty Marie Alexandrowna, in the last ten years, had learned to rue the continued visits of this bustling German-Hebrew lawyer.

The sharp-eyed servants instinctively felt that the house of Kriloff was tottering to its downfall!

For years these jealous attendants had watched the man of affairs slipping in with his portfolio under his arm, and, late and early, the baron and the round-faced lawyer were plunged in consultation over "papers—many papers."

Rude and uneducated, these two Russian peasants, both of them serf born, had still nourished the pride of the family which they had so long served, till it was their only cult. For, had not Elia toiled in the huge old mansion since the very days when the delicate Helène Souvaroff had brought it as her splendid dowry to the brilliant young noble, Demetrius Kriloff, one of the giant intellects of New Russia, then foremost in the cultivation of all Apollo's manifold graces in the barbaric minds of the unawakened moujik.

The vast property faced the fashionable Place Michel, and forty families yielded up a revenue to the noble proprietors who lodged themselves in stately

fashion in the belle étage. It was a princely heritage.

While Counselor Weinstock, having divested himself of his richly furred coats and silken wraps, awaited the coming of the young noblewoman in the library, Elia betook his grumblings to the society of his secretly beloved Marie Alexandrowna over their evening repast.

The dining-room page had already taken to the library the usual silver tray of refreshments, a perfunctory recognition of the counselor's standing as a gentleman.

Crooning away to the watchful nurse, Elia muttered: "It's high time for the Barina Xenia to come! Here is that lamb of lambs, the Barina Marie, left all alone with that Jewish wolf. I know—I know," the old pessimist mumbled. "The house will soon go; it will go where the Finland villa went; it will go like the Livonian timber forest, the finest on the Baltic. Where is the dear dead Barina's property in Wilna, the great house in Moscow, and the horse-breeding farms of Kharkov? Once there were piles of hundred-rouble notes in my master's secretaire with the Empress Catharine's picture on them; now, there is not a single dollar in the house!"

He clutched the nurse's hand: "I have gathered up all the little things in the master's room," he cried, in a husky voice. "I dared not give them to the Barina Marie. Only seventeen roubles, his medals and orders, his golden cuff-links, the old Breguët repeater, the Volga pearl studs that our dead mistress gave him, and the baptism cups of the children! All else is gone—gone!" the old man sobbed, bitterly!

The nurse sprang to his side. "There was the dead Barina's jewels," she faltered, "the Souvaroff diamonds, the great pearl necklace, the rubies which General Souvaroff brought from Persia."

"All gone," groaned Elia. "I was sent by the master with this Weinstock to take them, when the great coal-mine project failed. One-half to the bank—the other half to the Mont de Piété."

With streaming eyes, Marie Alexandrowna cried: "Let us go away, you and I! We have our three

thousand roubles! We can buy a little farm. Let us get away! They will take all!"

"We will see," murmured her elderly suitor. "When Barina Xenie comes I will tell her all! She is the one clear head, and then we must know all soon! For the bills," he mournfully said, "there is a little time, but they come in even now in clouds! The Barin never paid—these last two years—how could he?"

The two devoted retainers envied the tired sleep of the four or five under-servants, who had, by mere inertia and fear of being thrust out in a long, gloomy winter, remained at their posts, content with food and shelter as a wage.

While the declining fortunes of the house of Kriloff were being canvassed in this kitchen cabal, Counselor Matthias Weinstock had finished his mumbled salutations and apologies as the stately young mistress of the great home entered the library.

Weinstock eyed the beautiful patrician keenly as she took her father's seat at the head of the long table in the library. His conscience smote him as he opened the portfolio, and, with a trembling hand, arranged his papers. His eyes gleamed unsteadily behind the gold-rimmed spectacles of his crafty trade.

For the dignity, the touching helplessness of the girl stirred his heart. He had a numerous brood of his own over in the homely apartment beyond the Neva, where his alert life partner, Rachel, divided his sorrows and multiplied his joys. "There is always marriage," he thought, as the singular beauty of the girl flashed upon him for the first time, "with the Souvaroff kindred, with the Baroness Xenie, she must soon marry well," he mused, as he laid out his schedules and stamped papers.

The lawyer vainly struggled for an auspicious opening, for, with a sudden sense of guilt, he remembered how, in the three years of her budding womanhood, the young Baroness had been excluded from the confidential business seances held here with the apostle of "advanced Russia."

He looked back over the ten years of his professional connection, and, with an inward terror, recalled the

fact that the widower, Demetrius Kriloff, had a vast, though scattered and somewhat unproductive, estate, when the tired wife's steadfast eyes bade adieu forever to her visionary, but high-minded and affectionate, husband.

The revenue from the great fortress house on the Place Michel had always gone directly from the intendant into the hands of the Baroness Helène, and all the glittering projects of later years were only tried when the light had left those loving, clear eyes forever!

The record of failures was a long one—an appalling one. There was the Siberian gold mine, the Azov fishery, the Crimean vineyard, the patent rotary steam engine, the steam wool-scouring enterprise, and the compressed turf fuel company!

In all these, Baron Demetrius Kriloff had been led on, "an unhappy master, whom unmerciful disaster followed fast and followed faster," until a black cloud of ruin overhung the old mansion, and then, the sudden death of Baron Demetrius came, accentuating the final crash!

It was the compressed turf company which had dealt the final blow, and, with a guilty heart, Matthias Weinstock desired now to acquaint the resolute Xenie Karovitch, by proxy, with the final fall of her brother's fortunes.

And, anxious to escape the falling Gates of Gaza, the adroit speculator now sought to introduce in papers and figures the grim object lesson for the arriving noblewoman. "It will at least spur her up to acting for this lovely girl!" was the lawyer's only mental excuse. "She must give the child a home, at least, until she marries! Then, all will be right!"

Though Matthias Weinstock was no squire of dames, he was astonished at the beauty of this silent young queen of night.

He had intentionally avoided the daughter in the vigils of the last two winters with the unhappy father. And now, in recounting the long series of disastrous operations into which he had led the dead Baron, Weinstock blushed to remember the piteous exclamation of Demetrius Kriloff when the fifty thousand

roubles' worth of jewels left the old mansion: "She must never know—they were her mother's, and—her mother left them to her!"

"You wished to see me upon some business, Counselor," calmly said the young noblewoman. "Proceed, I am at your service."

Weinstock's lips were dry as he gazed around the well-remembered room. Besides the bookcases filled with all the treasures of European belles-lettres, and the classics beloved of the dead scholar, there were many plans, models, maps, projects, piles of cartons filled with technical papers, and these recalled the slow stages of the loss of a million roubles.

Even though the wily lawyer had taken grist of every in and out, profiting by his client's every disaster, he was now at a loss for words wherewith to deceive this simple gentlewoman.

"Your lamented father, the Baron Demetrius, honored me with his confidence for many years," said Weinstock, "and, therefore, I have come to you, as I presume that you know little of his affairs."

There was an awkward pause. "I know nothing whatever of my dear father's private business," faltered the girl, her eyes filling with tears as she saw before her his well-remembered writing implements, and all the *disjecta membra* of his work table.

How many times she had stolen on tiptoe to the door, to watch him there, bending over his interminable papers with the patient enthusiasm of a Russian bureaucrat.

"Have you made any plans, Excellence?" shamefully asked the lawyer, with his eyes bent down upon the papers which he was nervously fingering.

Marie Kriloff's pale face flushed slightly as she turned her frank eyes upon him. "Nothing whatever, Monsieur," she coldly remarked, in her pride of caste, remembering that Matthias Weinstock was simply a creature of the business world, a money-getting German-Jew, a man hovering "in nubibus" between the rank of gentleman and servant, a sort of necessary evil. "I shall defer all to the wishes of my aunt, Excellence Xenie Karovitch, who will arrive in a few

days. Perhaps," the girl said suddenly, feeling a vague distrust, "you should defer these matters until Madame Karovitch arrives."

"Unfortunately, Excellence," replied the lawyer, in a hard, strained voice, "there are many matters which I must lay before you alone. For some years the affairs of your honored father have been in an involved condition. There have been heavy losses, and serious troubles remain to be faced. I have all the papers here——" he stopped abruptly, as he saw the girl's face change.

In his eyes she had read the whole import of his bungled disclosure. "You are here to tell me that my father's fortune has been lost in his many speculations—these affairs of the past few years?" Her breast was heaving now in some vague new emotion, but her eyes were steadfastly fixed upon his crimsoned face.

"There is but little left; it has been ruinous, the vast amounts of interest paid!" murmured Weinstock. "I warned the Baron, but he would go on."

"Pardon," coldly said the beautiful orphan. "You can explain all the details later to Madame Karovitch. I would rather not discuss my father."

The lawyer's hands were busied with his papers, and he at last found words to continue: "It is forced upon me—the sorrow of my life—but I must do my duty. As the adviser of the late Baron Kriloff, I have been served with the notification by the Imperial Bank, of the foreclosure of the mortgage upon this house. It will be sold one month after the advertisement. I have just received the papers, and the announcement is in the *Gazette de Petersbourg*."

The orphan stood before him, her hands crossed on her breast, her eyes gazing wildly upon him. "Our house—to be sold; my mother's home; the home where she was married; where all her children were born!" Marie Kriloff seemed rooted to the spot.

"Gone—all gone," sadly echoed the semitic speculator. "And, I have here their demand for the possession, which I am forced to deliver to you personally. Of course, Madame Karovitch may wish to have her

own advocates look over all the papers. I will leave them with you."

"Let me end this painful interview, Monsieur," resolutely said the friendless girl. "I will accept nothing at your hands! You say that you were my father's friend. I know that for three years he has been closeted with you in these unending pour parlors of your joint operations. You must explain to the Excellence Karovitch how our estates have vanished, bit by bit, and how the law, as you say, turns me out into the street! I will not accept your confidence nor hear your explanations."

She rang the bell and the meager form of Elia appeared at the door.

"Stay, Excellence, for your own sake! Listen," pleaded the lawyer:

"Under the law you have a right to remain in your own apartments for six months longer. The Imperial Bank is desirous of gaining a proper legal control of the whole property at the end of the month of advertisement. I have been intrusted with two thousand five hundred roubles to be paid to you on your signing this agreement to vacate your apartment at the end of the legal month. Have you any money? This sum, at least, would provide for you for a year."

Marie Kriloff glanced contemptuously at the pile of crisp hundred-rouble notes and waved back the paper. "Show monsieur to his sleigh, Elia," she gravely said. "You may send your papers to Madame Karovitch on her arrival or to her lawyer. You will not be received here again. Take this money away with you!"

The humbled schemer, portfolio under his arm, scuttled away, casting back one terrified glance at the slender girl standing there, with her slender hands parting the heavy portières of the vaulted library.

The outer door closed with a clang as the heart-broken orphan dropped heavily into her father's vacant chair.

Elia, startled beyond measure, had sought for courage in Marie Alexandrowna's counsel as his young mistress, in a sudden self-humiliation, repeated that brutal query: "Have you any money?"

She gazed around the room in whose dusky corners she had so often chased the merry cherub sisters, now only sweet, haunting memories.

She saw the great quartos, over whose wondrous pictures she had lingered so many happy hours, with the fair-haired Serge, now lying in a soldier's grave under the Transcaspian sands.

And memory brought back to her the days, when, hidden behind her graceful mother's gown, she had pounced down upon her beloved father at his favorite books!

And, now, on this lonely night, she could see him again seated there, bending over his desk, under the golden glow of his two green-shaded student lamps! The delicate form, the thin, white hand nervously searching for his worn silver cigarette case, his kind, wavering, glassy, blue eyes, the bared temples, his silken, straggling beard, and the long hair falling upon his stooped shoulders.

Gentle in speech, inexhaustible in patience, courteous and refined beyond all men; a scholar, dreamer, poet, inventor, and social enthusiast. Demetrius Kriloff had poured out the wine of his life into too many leaky vessels! He had only built a pyramid of ruin!

"My poor father!" sobbed Marie, burying her head in her hands. She knew now that in seeking for the elevation of others, in toiling for the modernization of Russia, in pondering over a hundred recondite social schemes, he had been only the architect of his own ruin! It had not as yet occurred to her that she was soon to be left adrift on life's ocean a gentle, helpless waif; a beautiful, unprotected woman, still with a child's untroubled heart.

The five years at the Catherine Institute had been the only real happiness of her life, for they had taken away the dear mother to some undiscovered bourne long before the shy girl was placed among the five hundred young patricians of the famous school, only to be rescued from multitudinous assaults by brave, bright-eyed Sophie Naryshkin.

And, in the three years since she had returned to the

dear old home on the Place Michel, she had been the faithful companion of her father's loneliness.

True, there was always a daily drive or a sleigh ride with the widowed Madame Anykoff, who was the locataire of the other half frontage of the belle étage; there was the music and singing lessons; there were walks in the Jardin Michel, and on the rare occasions of Xenie Karovitch's summer visits, a trip to the islands, or an outing to Tsarskoe Zeloe, Gatschina, or Peterhoff.

For some unexplained reason, Demetrius Kriloff never trusted his one ewe lamb far afield with the dashing Madame Karovitch, and but once in the preceding winter, had Aunt Xenie triumphantly borne Marie away to the grand opera.

With a sudden confusion, the motherless girl found that even in her white muslin toilette, the opera glasses of the cavaliers were turned en batterie, to their box. But the dreamy-hearted girl soon forgot herself in gazing at Xenie Karovitch in all her glory!

And she had wandered in fairyland that night, borne out into another world by the witching melodies and the pictured glories of Lohengrin.

And, wonder upon wonder, across the rows of glittering boxes, she saw her schoolmate, Sophie Naryshkin, a dream of beauty—the victorious Venus—now the bride of a great patrician, gleaming there in diamonds and as fair as Worth can make the loveliest of Eve's daughters.

When that vivacious and independent social star, Madame Xenie Karovitch, had departed for a summer in the Crimea, Marie Kriloff had overheard a brief passage-at-arms between Demetrius Kriloff and his spirited sister.

"Child—child no more," quoted the lady. "She is now a sleeping beauty! Wait till Prince Charming appears, and you may remember my warning words."

But the season had passed with three summer months of isolation by the lonely Finnish lakes, and then, Demetrius Kriloff had eagerly returned to his beloved library, his mountains of papers, his Committees on Public Education, his plans for the Encouragement

of Manufactures, his Commissions of Art, on Prison Reform, his unfinished History of Siberia, his sessions at the Conseil d'Etat, and his evening conferences with the bustling Weinstock.

In sheer self-protection, the lonely girl had fled away from the tide of projectors, men of advanced ideas, inventors and placeless nobles, which ebbed and flowed in and out of the great house on the Place Michel.

The timid girl, blossoming out into a wonderful beauty, had gazed daily in her mirror, and never yet found herself fair; she was but dimly conscious of the gloating passion in the eyes of a jeweled general who had carried away her Aunt Xenie in state for the great races, and, living in her unbroken calm—surrounded by her books and music—dreaming her innocent dreams—she never saw the paleness creeping over the thinned face of her father.

She little knew that every night, after she had sat before the samovar, in place of the vanished mother, that Demetrius Kriloff paced his lonely rooms in an agony of grief and self-accusation.

The meshes of Weinstock's net entrapped him now beyond hope of escape. When the artfully suggested schemer had failed one after another, and eaten up Marie's unprotected dowry, while she was yet a school-girl in the splendid prison of the institute, then the first mortgage on the house of Helène Souvaroff's child had been followed by others, quickly compounding the ruinous interest and the new principal and charges.

Sinking under the burden of his secret sorrows, the weak victim of a gigantic series of swindles, died in silence and never knew that the skillful machinations of certain keen-eyed capitalists had set on Matthias Weinstock to lead his victim into the forced disposition of the superb property on the Place Michel for not more than a third of its value.

The end had come suddenly, only old Elia was by his bedside when Demetrius Kriloff, with one expiring mental effort, saw the gulf of poverty yawning before the helpless girl whose fortune he had thrown away.

"Marie, my poor darling," he whispered, and then he died with that beloved name upon his pallid lips.

It was the warm-hearted Madame Anykoff who had telegraphed to Odessa to Excellence Xenie Karovitch: "Come at once, Demetrius is dead; I fear the worst; Marie needs you."

And yet, the defeated regenerator and philanthropist was two weeks in his grave before the wandering widowed beauty received the telegram, and was called away from a merry hunting party at Tiflis, where a Grand Duke was being royally entertained by that dashing soldier, General Baron Michel Wraxine.

When Xenie Karovitch showed the dispatch to the man who was her bond slave, Wraxine growled his dissent.

For was not Madame Karovitch his chief lure to obtain from the Grand Duke that promotion to the command of the corps at Rovno, to which he had so ardently aspired.

"I must go, Michel," she whispered. "This girl is as beautiful as a star! She can not be left alone in Saint Petersburg. Trust to me! I shall meet the Grand Duke on his return, and you later at Rovno, when the forget-me-nots bloom around the old palace of the Lubomirskis."

An angry exclamation died away on Michel Wraxine's lips, for he remembered suddenly the beautiful brown eyes of the budding Hebe whom he had seen but once in Demetrius Kriloff's faded drawing-rooms.

When Michel Wraxine hoarsely whispered his adieu: "Remember! You come to me at Rovno with the first roses," as the departing beauty boarded her steamer at Batoum, she murmured: "When did I ever fail you?" And so, to the artful beauty a new avenue of power opened, as she became the head of the family!

It was midnight before Elia and Marie Alexandrowna, now thoroughly alarmed, ventured to peer behind the velvety Persian curtains of the library. The faithful servants well knew the late hours of the high-class Russian, but their young mistress had never heard the midnight bells chime before.

With pale faces, they rushed in, for there before them lay the lovely girl prone and helpless on the tufted carpet before the old visionary's empty chair.

"It has killed her," muttered the old butler. "The poor, helpless lamb! She knows of the ruin at last!"

Though Elia could not read, the house dvornik, the smart French maid of Madame Anykoff, and Pierola, the fashionable hairdresser, had already spread over the great apartment mansion the news of the published foreclosure notice of the sale by the Imperial Bank!

While the old man ran for a strong cordial, the ex-nurse flew away for the aid of the stout sewing woman, and when the Baroness Marie was safely borne to her room by the eager women, Elia pondered upon his own suddenly evolved responsibilities.

While awaiting news of the restoration of the suffering girl, the aged servitor sadly wandered over the vast apartment, with its barracklike rooms crowded with the haughty trophies of the Kriloff's and the Souvaroff's. The vast chambers were so large that a human voice sank away in unmeaning echoes.

With each successive loss of an estate, the family pictures, plate, and icons, the swords and banners, all the treasured heirlooms, had been gathered into the last stronghold of the doomed race which still stemmed the tide of misfortune.

And even poor Demetrius Kriloff had superstitiously refrained from selling or pledging these touching exhibits of dead and buried "human documents."

When he closed his weary eyes, a last pang, as he muttered "My poor little girl," was the knowledge that the one stain on his life was the wrongful disposition of the historic Souvaroff jewels.

It had been months before he learned the bitter truth from the smug Weinstock—the news that those heirlooms were all forfeited beyond all hope of return.

And, yet, while the Souvaroff pearls shone (in private) on the snowy neck of Coralba, the reigning diva, the millionaire banker who gave them had prudently warned the swarthy Italian beauty to hide these splendors till she was well out of Russia.

And, only the fact that the superb family loot

in the rooms was known far and near, in high society, had kept Matthias Weinstock from one comprehensive swoop!

There were even now a few money-lending scoundrels in the mines at Nertchinsk, in far-away, frozen Siberia, who had shorn their helpless sheep far too close.

And so sadly did Elia gaze on the pictured Marshal Souvaroff, the great Ambassador Kriloff, the faces of beauty and soldier, statesman and palace dignitary, maid of honor and sweet-faced children, blossoming out in innocent beauty.

The sacred icons of a dozen households, the golden swords and baptismal plate, all recalled vanished households where only the foot of the stranger echoed now!

"All this to go to the Jews—this heavenly child to be thrust into the street—never!" swore the old man. "May Saint Vladimir soon bring the Barina Xenie. She is a power! She is of the higher palace circle! They will not dare!"

When, with a frightened face, Marie Alexandrowna came back to tell of the young beauty's helpless moaning; her bitter tears and the sobs which now told of her heart's silent anguish, the old butler was roused to action. He had already found a cherished plan, but that demanded the consent and aid of the buxom object of his affections.

"The Barina must have help!" he muttered, and then his mind fixed itself upon the loyal Madame Barbe Anykoff! "She is one of our own people—Madame Xenie's best friend! I will call her!"

For forty years Elia had followed the winter habits of the Russian aristocrats. Far up in the northern land, with only eight hours of sickly day, the eight hours of night until four o'clock in the morning were given up to pleasure by the upper classes, whose slumber only ended at noon.

And so it fell out that though one o'clock had already sounded, Elia's timid appeal found Madame Anykoff in full dress, laughing over her card-table

with a princess, an ambassador, and a corps commander.

The faithful butler could see, through the open door, that card-table piled with gold and notes; only a narrow hallway separated all this heaped-up affluence from the darkened home where seventeen paper roubles represented the last of two great fortunes.

Under the great emerald necklace gleaming on Barbe Anykoff's bosom, beat a warm and passionate Russian heart!

She easily divined the crisis from the silent agony of the old man's face.

With a comprehensive smile of adieu, she called a reigning beauty away from a Czar's aid-de-camp flirting in the cozy corner of the far drawing-room.

"Anna Feodorowna," she whispered, "keep the bank for me. I leave you in charge! There is great trouble over there!"

She nodded sadly toward the Kriloff entrance. When the alert-minded widow was in the hall, she whispered quickly, "Tell me, Elia, what is it?"

"The Barina knows all now," sobbed the old man. "And, I think it has killed her!"

With all the ardor of her generous nature, Barbe Anykoff muttered a comprehensive curse upon all Jews and money-leeches, and then sighed, "Poor Demetrius!" crossing herself devoutly as she entered the ruined home.

And the daylight found the unwearied devotee of fashion tenderly watching over the girl, whose trembling hand had closed gratefully upon the widow's bejeweled fingers.

Then and there, Barbe Anykoff vowed to frankly unfold to the coming Baroness Xenie all the mysterious gossip which had followed the wrecking of Demetrius Kriloff's fortunes.

With a grim triumph, the widow answered the telegram of Baroness Xenie from Kharkov: "I am in charge; hasten here; you are sorely needed."

Before a day was over, Madame Anykoff had drawn the whole story of the past from old Elia and the sagacious Marie Alexandrowna.

While her charming deputy from her own household cheered the silent sufferer, the good Samaritan roved over the whole great mansion, and piece by piece, gathered up fragmentary stories of the cunning fraud and wholesale overreaching.

The vast house, sheltering fifty families, was a human encyclopedia, and all the details of the fall of the houses of Kriloff and Souvaroff were soon forthcoming under the searchlight of Marie Kriloff's new champion. "Wait! Only wait!" murmured Madame Barbe. "The wolf pack shall be driven off. For Xenie is brave, and she has the ear of the Grand Duke Anatole!"

The tenderness of Madame Anykoff, and the light-hearted chatter of the Countess Anna Feodorowna at last brought back the light to Marie Kriloff's dimmed eyes. The orphaned girl had locked up her sorrows in her lovely bosom under the seal of silence, while the quick-witted widow sped down to Tosna to meet Baroness Xenie, now dashing homeward on the Moscow train. "She shall be armed, at all points, before she arrives," was Barbe's effective precaution.

Marie Kriloff had shed no tear over her ruin, save when Elia and the nurse stole into the orphan's retreat.

Falling on their knees the faithful pair brought out their little hoard of the twenty-five years of patient drudgery.

"It is not much, Barina," murmured the nurse, "but it is all yours. We were your parents' serfs born. We were to marry and live on our little farm, but all we have is yours. So, take it for love's sake!"

Then Marie Kriloff's eyes were veiled into a sudden mist. She could not see the bundle of tattered notes and oft-fingered golden imperials; the heavy sack of shining silver roubles.

But she smiled on the faithful pair through her tears: "I thank you, my good, faithful ones," she bravely said. "I do not need it! But, I will never forget you!"

"You shall take it." affectionately prayed the old butler. "There is nothing in this world but gold! It

is the only master—at the last! There is only gold! Without gold, the Barin is no better than a moujik; the Barina than a gypsy beggar! You must take it.

"Here is the dear, dead master's little belongings! His watch, his golden eyeglasses, his bosom pearls; the watch I have wound for thirty years, and, only seventeen roubles! You must take our money!"

Awed by her gentle promise to take if need came, they stole away, and left her there, sadly listening to the chime of the old repeater, the first sound which had charmed her ear in the old happy days when there was an angel in the house, and before the usurer's shackles had crushed her father's heart.

CHAPTER II.

AUNT TATIA'S DIPLOMACY.

An electric thrill seemed to arouse all the dwellers in the Maison Kriloff, as a splendid sleigh dashed up the next day, in a blinding snowstorm, and the gold-banded cap of the dvornik flew off, as he dashed out to open the doors leading into the covered archway of the great court.

There were dozens of heads at the windows of the great façade, and in the wide halls of the vast mansion lady's maid and tutor, servant and pageboy, all awaited eagerly the first morsels of gossip.

But, all these were doomed to disappointment, for there was no one quick enough to catch a glimpse of the face of the lady who was Barbe Anykoff's companion.

True, there was visible a fleecy bundle of sables, a rich sea-otter turban, a filmy Circassian veil, and the quick, pattering sound of Parisian bottines was heard as Xenie Karovitch disappeared within the splendid apartment of Madame Barbe Anykoff.

But no sign of life was discernible in the Kriloff residence, and the domestics below, the porters in the cavernous casemates piling the fragrant birchwood, the marmitons of the rotisseries, the lounging attendants,

had no bit of gossip wherewith to reward their inquisitive patrons.

And so, the night-life of the huge apartment house went on—light and laughter within, crystalline cold and driving flakes without.

Youth and beauty swarmed in and out of the Maison Kriloff, operaward, supperward, seeking palace and hall.

The marble stairways of the six stories were ever thronged with lover and schemer, with student and officer, with priest and police spy.

Sly gypsy beauties stole in there, light of foot and hard of heart, to meet their vulpine adorers, and grave officials buttoned up life and death secrets under their furs, as the sleighs came and went in the courtyard.

Silence still reigned in the darkened Kriloff home, where Marie lay on a Persian divan, her mind haunted with the simple old servitor's reiterated code: "There is nothing in the world but gold, good, red gold! It is the last love of all; the one cure-all!"

With her soul still shaken with the first rude blast of adversity, her untouched heart dominated only by a natural sorrow, the orphan, all unconscious of her beauty, stood unarmed at the threshold of a world as yet unknown to her, the seething passion whirlpool of Russian life.

And, innocent child-woman, simple-hearted and unstained, she waited alone for the scroll of the future to unroll.

As ignorant of the fierce pleasures of the Winter City as a babe, she had only vaguely dreamed of the life and love of the great world without while poring over the expurgated belles-lettres of the Catharine Institute.

In no human heart had she discerned the strong tide of the pride of life, save the brief glimpses of Xenie Karovitch, the dazzling "Aunt Tatia" whose thrall seemed to be on all men.

There was surely some life secret here which she had not learned in the unbroken gray surroundings of her colorless life.

Gray clouds, gray mists, cold, gray-sanded snows; leaden-gray skies, the neutral gray background of pur-

poseless days, of undreamed dreams, of the gray pall which covered her future and hid with its mantle the life tragedy played out before her blinded eyes.

And now, while awaiting the arrival of the imperious patrician Xenie Karovitch she recalled the ominous words: "Beware of her, if she ever wakes! She has your own ideality, veiling her mother's spirited and passionate nature!"

"Femme incomprise—let her but know her power, let her wear her crown; it will be either one of wildest joys or bitterest sorrows!"

"And she will wake at last, for there is but one arch magician, angel, or devil—Love! Love's wings are overfleet, and, like the panther's feet, the feet of Love." There is no power that will turn her back, once that her feet tread the flinty paths which we women follow through life!"

While the orphan awaited the arrival of this brilliant woman who was her one life enigma, there was a resolute campaign opening across the silent halls of the Maison Kriloff.

Baroness Xenie Karovitch had emerged from her furs and wraps, and, seated at the table with Barbe Anykoff, plunged "in media res."

"First, my dear Barbe, you are to give me your Swiss. I must send a note to Kalomine"—the beauty bent her head to avoid a tell-tale blush—"and a summons to the Hebrew jackal! He is only the paid tool of the usurers who are swallowing up every reachable Russian estate! and he shall feel my claws! Go over to Marie; send me Elia and the nurse. Tell Marie that I will be here on the midnight train. I must see Kalomine before I alarm Weinstock, and I wish to closely question the servants. You can tell Marie that you have had a telegram from me. I will send for you at midnight, and then come in with my wraps on, just as if I came from the train."

Xenie Karovitch watched with dreamy eyes her friend's exit. "I wonder if she suspects," mused the newcomer. Baroness Xenie's thoughts went back ten years to the night when the director of the Imperial

Bank had first leaned over her chair in rapture at the opera.

It was before the meeting of the reigning belle with the saturnine General Baron Michel Wraxine.

"I am an old woman now," thought the widow, a Venus Victrix still at thirty-three, "and Alexander Kalomine may not have forgiven me; but he was always bon camarade, and I must fight for the child's sake. We shall see!"

It was too true that Madame Barbe Anykoff recalled a buried chronique scandaleuse. "Can she win him back now?" thought the still handsome blond patrician. "And yet, all men are as wax in her hands."

The romance of the old faded from Madame Karovitch's busy mind as Elia glided silently into the little room, where the fair traveler was discussing a pheasant and a well-warmed bottle of Clos Vougeot.

A smile of coming triumph hovered on the curved lips of the beautiful woman. Already the tall Swiss was dashing along in a sleigh to the yacht club, where Excellence Kalomine always consecrated his evenings to the fickle goddess Fortuna.

"If he remembers Xenie Karovitch he will come," proudly declared the imperious beauty, as she complacently saw herself handsomely reflected in the glass.

When Elia dropped on his knee and kissed her hand Xenie wasted no query in sympathy. "Tell me," she sharply cried, "did poor Demetrius leave any money?"

The old man's gloomy face foreshadowed his answer.

"And Helenè's jewels—the diamonds—the pearls—her ruby necklace—where are they?"

"The lawyer took them all," said Elia, "six months ago; half to the bank, half to the pawnshop," the old man babbled on, "but the banker Milovitch bought them all for the great singing woman here—the Italian. I know his man—and—he told me."

Xenie Karovitch bounded from her chair. "Poor Demetrius, doting fool! Robbed with his eyes open! I'll have this Weinstock in the fortress. Thank God for this! The Grand Duke Anatole will be here in three days; and now, for Kalomine! He must aid me, at any price."

There was a burning flood of crimson on her cheeks as she checked herself and sharply cried: "Tell me all! quick! for I must know what to do! These harpies shall disgorge all that Demetrius did not throw away himself!"

The revengeful beauty at last had heard all that the nurse and butler could reveal, and now, armed with Madame Anykoff's disclosures, only awaited the arrival of her visitor to plant her heavy artillery for an instant attack.

"Just as I fancied, robbed with his eyes open! Poor Helenè! If she had lived she would have shielded him! Alas! Marie has but her face for her fortune! Face and figure," mused the baroness, as she dismissed the servants with a stern injunction to say nothing of her arrival.

"If what Barbe says is true, Marie, 'en bonnes fortunes,' with a suitable setting, will be a reigning beauty."

With a start which brought the blood leaping to her heart, the brilliant woman gazed at the little card suddenly handed her by Barbe's maître d'hôtel. The simple words brought a wild surge of emotion to her stormy breast.

She stood holding the card: "Alexandre Kalomine, Directeur de la Banque Imperial," as a stately man silently parted the drooping curtains of the alcoved cau-sene.

One glance was enough, for the tall stranger extended both his arms!

"Xenie," he cried. "After all these years!" And it was no feigned emotion which caused Xenie Karovitch to meet his eyes in a silent glance of entreaty, as she drew him down to a place on the divan.

"Can I count on you, Alexandre?" she faltered, "after our bitter parting—after all my folly?"

"One such moment makes me forget the past," said the director, raising her hand to his lips and covering it with passionate kisses.

"You shall have your reward," murmured Xenie, with a veiled glance which made her listener quiver in every thrilling nerve. "There has been a great wrong

done—a crime—a spoliation of Demetrius's orphan child! You alone can save her aught from the wreck! Will you be my one instrument to punish these jackals?"

"I am yours to the death!" quickly cried the great financier. "Tell me all; but first—"

There was a silence in which two hearts beat madly in a reflex of an old, lost love, and then the rosy Delilah knew that her Samson had bowed again to the yoke he loved—the clinging white arms which were wreathed around him in this hour of a woman's regained power.

In half an hour, the acute-minded Kalomine had fathomed all the audacious plan of the Baroness Xenie, and the acute financier marveled at the cunning of the woman whom he had once thought only to be a baby-faced Venus, fit only to be man's plaything, and only worthy of the dalliance of an idle hour.

"I will come to-morrow afternoon, as you wish, Xenie," he whispered. "If you can only trap this scheming usurer, he will reveal the plots of those behind him. I will see my friend Milovitch to-morrow. If Weinstock had no right to sell the jewels outright, then you are safe, if the Grand Duke Anatole will get you an order for an inquisition into the mortgages. Detain Weinstock here till I come! And then, Xenie?" he hesitatingly said.

"Victory first," answered the undaunted woman. "After that you shall feel my gratitude. I shall remain here until it is time to go to Yalta."

The return of Baroness Xenie's messenger admonished the official that it was time to depart.

"Hasten, mon ami," whispered Xenie. "I have Weinstock's answer. He will come, with all the papers, to-morrow at two."

"Good," joyously cried the banker. "Give him no hint of his peril. Hear his whole story. Get all the documents ready. I will breakfast at the club with Milovitch, and, if all is well, bring him directly here."

Xenie Karovitch sat alone while the Imperial Bank official disappeared discreetly.

In his richly furred surtout, his dark eyes gleaming out over a silvery sable beard, Kalomine was a noble

figure, stately and distinguished. At forty-five, master of the financial secrets of the great Imperial Bank, he was a power in St. Petersburg, though the glittering court circle was closed to him, by his mere private station and his commercial functions.

"A pity," murmured the audacious Xenie. "He has heart, and is fondly attached to me! But, Wraxine's station and his hold on the Grand Duke is my only anchor in the tossing sea of trouble! If Alexandre had but Wraxine's noble rank—then, I might gain a solid footing at last!"

With all the recklessness of her class, the Baroness Xenie was plunged in a sea of floating debt, and yet she had preserved her Volhynian estate unmortgaged, trusting to the aid of General Baron Wraxine, who was the second self of the powerful young Grand Duke Anatole, Inspector-General of the Russian Cavalry.

Wraxine had vaguely hinted at a great stroke to be made in the summer, when the commands of the army corps and the outlying military districts were to be rearranged.

"If we hold the Grand Duke's favor, Xenie," was Wraxine's parting injunction, "if he fails us not, then your debts and mine will be washed out by the first wave of our impending fortune! Keep him in eye, deny him nothing, watch him in all things, and I will appear at your side to turn the scale at the crucial moment! We must wait till the command at Rovno comes up for a final settlement!"

Seated gazing triumphantly in her mirror, Xenie Karovitch now awaited the proper moment for her supposed arrival on the midnight train. The regained empire over the rich banker smoothed away her one pressing need in her dashing campaign, ready money, the supply of the sinews of war!

"I must hide my intimacy with Kalomine from Wraxine's friends here! Michel is a ravening wolf in his jealousy of all men, save the Grand Duke," the fair intrigante laughed, softly. "Kalomine must conceal his amorettes from the world here, for a director-general of the Imperial Bank must be above all suspicion of human weakness. The tide is surely setting my way.

Marie is young and absolutely inexperienced! She must be held helplessly in my hands, and, as she has not a rouble, she will be a mere pawn in my game! And she must know nothing! Once that her passions were aroused Helenè's daughter would be as intractable as her mother!"

At thirty-three, Xenie Karovitch's figure was that of the *Venue de Melos*. In her dark dress, molded to her perfect form, the imperial otter trimming accentuating the rich blue of her robe, the Muscovite was a lovely vision of the pride of life. Her soft, brown tresses were coiled in rich masses around her stately head, where the full, pleasure-loving lips and tender eyes, dark as the sloe, shaded down the marked intelligence of her forehead. The clear brown of her satiny cheeks glowed now with the crimson of her latest triumph, and she had noted with delight how her velvety voice had brought the light of passion once more to the eyes of the pleasure-jaded banker!

"Not an old woman yet!" murmured the imperious beauty, "not while men yield like melting wax! Time has halted in his path, and stayed his kindly hand. Now for this simple girl! She must only know me as a Lady Bountiful!"

Throwing her blue fox shuba lightly over her shapely shoulders, Xenie Karovitch swept lightly across the silent marble halls. In a few moments she was fondly clasped in Marie's arms!

"There, my lonely dove, you are to suffer no more; you are to sleep! I shall not leave you again!" murmured Xenie, brushing the tired girl's eyelids down. "To-morrow, you shall tell me all!"

With a significant glance at Barbe Anykoff, the baroness glided from the room, only to be followed soon by her semi-confidante.

"The sleeping potion in a little wine has done its work, Xenie," laughed Madame Anykoff. "Come over for a little causerie, and then, rest for your opening campaign."

The good-humored widow Anykoff looked thin and blanched in the yellow candlelight, as the two drank a merry bumper of champagne in Barbe Anykoff's bou-

doir. The light-colored robes, the pale turquoises, the thinned golden hair, and the blanched complexion, telling of veloutine and poudre de riz, only evidenced Barbe Anykoff's gallantly unsuccessful struggle against her forty odd years of headlong pleasure.

"Xenie," frankiy chattered the good-natured widow, "did you remark that child's startling beauty? Look to your own laurels!"

"She is now only a princess of snows," answered Xenie. "Given the unconscious return of her youthful spirits and a little ripening, with the attractions of dress and jewels, she will sweep everything before her! Alas! she has no money, and so I must launch her on the tide soon, and make her a position by the sheer force of her singularly thrilling beauty. She would be a mate for a Grand Duke."

"Look to her," seriously said Barbe. "This old fortress has been a faithful safeguard, but once launched in the gay world men will struggle for her smiles, and you know our tiger-hearted Russians."

"I shall always be at her side, Barbe," said the brave freelance of society, "and she shall have a proper setting, a fitting entourage, and a brilliant career, if she only trusts to me!"

"Look to her," dreamily said Barbe, as she bade her friend good night. "There is tragedy in her eyes! I fear the late flowering of her passions!"

"Ah, ma belle amie, I will see that she steers her life bark more by the head than the heart! Trust to me, she shall learn to play her part in the Comedie Humaine."

And long after Barbe Anykoff was wandering in the land of dreams that vigorous-minded plotter, Madame Karovitch, lay revolving the Napoleonic campaign which she had evolved for the morrow from the thorough disclosures of the old servants and Barbe Anykoff's precis of the whole season's crafty intrigues.

"De l'audace, de l'audace, toujours de l'audace," was Xenie Karovitch's deliberately chosen motto, and, bright and rosy, she took up the reins of office on the morrow, having already charmed the light back into Marie's eyes by her joyously effervescent ministrations.

" You are to have a daily drive; you are not to mope; you are to have some of your institute friends now rally around you, and you are soon to leave this old tomb," confidently remarked Xenie. " Under blue skies you shall pluck the forget-me-nots of Rovno, the roses of Yalta. And so, good-by to tears and lonely moods. I will never leave you, and you shall be my Princess Hebe, my fairy of spring."

With a resolute decision, Madame Karovitch had soon fathomed all details of the household situation.

The grave-faced intendant had made his reports before noon, and the indignant Baroness knew that for the last three months the entire receipts of the house had been paid in to Weinstock as the agent of the mortgage proprietors.

Even Elia's piles of unpaid bills were listed. It was, however, not so fatal an involvement! There were but twenty thousand roubles of indebtedness.

" Bah!" murmured Xenie, lighting her cigarette. " They must wait a year, at any rate, by law! Kalomine can cash these all now for fifteen thousand! I will start in with a clear field. And now, for this Monsieur Weinstock!"

It was with an adroit defiance of fortune that Xenie called in the most elegant equipage in the nearest Écurie!

Marie, a star-eyed beauty, was whirling along in an unconscious elation of spirits at Madame Anykoff's side when Counselor Matthias Weinstock, portfolio in hand, entered the library where he had fought so many victorious battles of triumphant usury. He little dreamed, as the great French clock chimed three, that Director Alexandre Kalomine and the troubled millionaire Milovitch were now cozily ensconced in Madame Karovitch's boudoir, enjoying a few hands at piquet while waiting for their cue.

And Elia, with a frightened, pale face, timidly ministered to two gentlemen without names, who were strang looking misfits in their plain clothes, as they made merry at the family table in the great dining-room.

There was a couple of sleighs and an escort of Cos-

sacks awaiting the uplifted finger of the senior police officer now stationed across the Place Michel.

Banker Milovitch was happy in a sudden windfall of the unhopred-for participation in a very profitable government loan, in return for certain friendly disclosures already made to the director-general.

With serenely steady eyes, the Baroness Karovitch had listened for an hour to Matthias Weinstock's plausible interpretations of the masses of papers produced from the depths of his portfolio.

For all the lady's seeming quiet, an uneasy feeling had permeated the lawyer's troubled mind.

The Baroness seemed to show neither surprise nor resentment at the Pelion upon Ossa of poor Demetrius Kriloff's unhappy speculations.

And her brows only darkened at last when, with an awkward pause, Weinstock produced a bill of sale of all the personal articles in the apartments of the Kriloff family.

This was made directly to the avaricious Weinstock by the dead enthusiast, and it was only dated two months previous to Baron Demetrius's decease.

The final proffer of the two thousand five hundred roubles for Marie Kriloff's agreement to vacate brought the baroness, bounding to her feet.

"You have done well, very well, Weinstock, for your clients," she bitterly said. "I think that I now understand the whole affair."

"And so, Madame la Baronne, I will leave you until such time as you may give me the names of your lawyers with whom I may settle all the details of possession."

There was a sneering smile of triumph on the German Hebrew's face, for he had always recognized a foe in the bright-faced noblewoman.

His hat was in his hand, and he was bowing low, when Madame Karovitch glided to the table and struck a silver gong.

She whispered a word to Elia and then turned to the astonished money-broker.

"One moment, sir! I have a question to ask you—just one single question!"

The lawyer gasped, as the bearded Milovitch en-

tered, followed by the elegant form of Monsieur Alexandre Kalomine.

"In the presence of these gentlemen," the lady quietly said, "I ask you now to show your legal authority for the sale of the Souvaroff jewels!"

The trapped rascal sank back into a chair.

"Monsieur Demetrius," he gasped.

"Had no right either to pledge or sell them! They are the property of Baroness Marie Kriloff, a direct inheritance from her mother," cried Baroness Xenie, in a ringing voice. "And, as the tutrice of my orphan niece, I now demand their instant return!"

"I have no control of them!" cried the lawyer, suddenly brought to bay.

"But, I have," quietly said Constantine Milovitch, "and I have this day listed them and deposited them with the Imperial Bank, sealed, in the possession of Director-General Kalomine, to await the action of the courts."

"Is this true, Monsieur?" sweetly said the victorious Baroness, turning her glowing black eyes calmly upon her recalled lover.

The director-general presented a sealed receipt with his very best bow. "I have listed them from the papers given to my friend, and now, I acknowledge their possession."

"Then," sternly said the outraged woman, "I demand the arrest of this man for their criminal conversion, and also for uttering here a forgery, a pretended bill of sale of the whole movable property here in the Kriloff apartments. It is without witness, and an evident forgery."

When Matthias Weinstock slunk to the door, he was confronted by the two impassive police agents.

One of them, stepping to the window, waved his hand.

In five minutes, the two sleighs had departed under escort with the thunderstruck prisoner.

While Weinstock cowered down in the police sleigh the two financiers were glancing over the schedules and papers scattered upon Demetrius Kriloff's table.

"It is easy to see the method adopted to swamp the

poor Baron's fortunes," said the acute Milovitch. "All these mortgages have been taken by various individuals at criminally usurious rates; the names in some cases are those of Israelites who can not acquire realty by mortgage. All the interest, commissions, foreclosure fees, and expenses have been illegally compounded, and the whole sum has been transferred finally in one blanket mortgage to the Imperial Bank. There has been two hundred thousand roubles added by these nefarious tricks, and," he sadly said, "there is but one way to obtain a recision and scaling down."

"And that is?" breathlessly asked Baroness Xenie.

"A summary order from the Emperor's privy council, directing the extra-official examination. In the meantime, I can aid you. I will press the charge against this scoundrel for the embezzlement of the jewels, and sue him for the return of the purchase price. I had to pay a premium myself, to obtain them."

Baroness Xenie's eyes rested a moment searchingly on Kalomine's face. They both knew the probable extortion of the audacious Coralba, before that exigeant diva would allow Milovitch to substitute Outchinkoff's very best diamond parure, *en suite*, for the coveted Souvaroff gems.

"And how can I get this order?" murmured Baroness Xenie.

"I am now transacting some heavy loan negotiations for the government, as well as rearranging the Grand Duke Anatole's financial matters," suavely said Kalomine. "I think that you met His Highness at Tiflis," concluded the director.

And then, Xenie Karovitch's face flushed crimson as she bent her handsome head in assent.

"He must know all of the Wraxine flirtation," mused the startled woman.

"I will ask the Grand Duke to come with me, Madame," courteously said Kalomine, "and look at these papers! I know that Captain Serge Kriloff was once on his staff! If you beg for His Highness's personal aid you can get that order in a week! And I will have our bank actuary sift out the real legal balances on the mortgages for which our bank must be recouped!"

"I agree with my confrère there is at least two hundred thousand roubles of rebate due the estate! Only the duly legalized mortgages will hold in law!"

Monsieur Constantine Milovitch was a man of fine social perceptions! He gladly availed himself of Madame Karovitch's invitation for dinner in the ensuing week; and, then, bowing low over the fair champion's hand, took his leave.

The cozy breakfast in Xenie Karovitch's boudoir which followed the departure of the observant Milovitch, put Madame Xenie in the highest good humor.

"I will send you our own lawyer," said Kalomine. "He will soon get at the roots of the whole matter."

"As we are a governmental institution controlled by the strictest code, we can not accept usury, and as for Weinstock's pretended bill of sale, it is neither stamped nor witnessed. I will send our lawyer to harass him in the civil prison, and as his associates dare not come forward, he will make a clean breast of his roguery."

"The Grand Duke Anatole will be here in four days. I will bring him here myself to see the papers! I will leave him to you—say a few pleasant words, and he will get you that order from the council. In the meantime, I will send you thirty thousand roubles this afternoon by my confidential clerk. Let him have the dossier of the debts. I will have them all scaled down a half and paid at once."

"And yet," sadly murmured Xenie, "we must leave this old family property."

"True," rejoined the banker, "but, the order of council will give you a year's grace. My summer villa at Viborg is yours. You can easily ask Madame Anykoff to be your companion, and, next winter, you can have the choice of any of the handsomest apartments in any of the great properties which the bank controls."

"So, only handle the Grand Duke with velvet gloves, and I will save you all that I can from this wrecked fortune!"

Kalomine read Xenie's gratitude in her glowing eyes. "Of course, Xenie," he murmured, "I must put these moneys only at your disposition."

"Poor Demetrius left dozens of legal claims arising from his speculations. You must be made tutrice of your niece's estate. In this way I can hand the sums over to you, privately, as realized, and the cormorants will be powerless to take the funds away. Excellence Marie must leave all her business to you!"

"Trust to me for that, Alexandre," murmured the fair intrigante. "She is a child—an absolute babe—as far as knowledge of the world goes! Poor neophyte! She showed me to-day seventeen roubles—all the little inheritance of Demetrius's misfortunes."

"And, she must not have an idea of any of her rights," silkily continued the banker.

"Only under your complete control can she make any headway! She must never suspect our hidden friendship," he murmured.

"And the best disposition of her is a rich marriage—and as soon as possible!"

"We are comrades, allies; yes, even more; what you will," faltered Xenie. "But I must have a free hand until I can rid myself of this child-hearted woman! Then, after that——"

"You belong to me alone," cried the enraptured man, as he knelt at her feet.

That evening, while Marie, now happy at heart, joined Madame Anykoff's little circle of intimates in superb state at the opera, Xenie Karovitch queened it over her hastily gathered friends. For the Queen of the Red Roses had resumed her vicarious empire over Alexandre Kalomine's fiery passions.

In her busy brain were already revolving a hundred schemes for the exploitation of the lovely orphan.

"I must dispose of her quickly, and to my best advantage," mused Xenie. "For, after she tastes the cup of Life, she will not be a mere lay figure in my hands. And, at my side, she would soon shine me down!"

The artful woman had caught the secret of control from her practical-minded lover.

"The golden scepter is the only one! I will hold her helpless in my hands as long as I have the purse strings!"

And, yet, Xenie Karovitch wondered what niche the beautiful orphan would fill in the summer campaign at Rovno and Yalta.

"There is still the season of mourning. She must be made to feel her dependence upon me; and as to her future, Michel Wraxine must aid me! And so, this entangled estate will cover all my relations with Kalomine. He will surely hide our little winter amourette for his own sake, and I can trust to him."

It was a week later when the busy accountants of the Imperial Bank had finished their careful investigations of the voluminous contents of Matthias Weinstock's portfolio.

All was now life and light within the Kriloff home, for Xenie Karovitch's stimulating presence had brought a freedom from all haunting cares.

The cheerful servants now blithely moved around conscious of the sustaining power of that wealth which they deemed to be the natural element of the indefatigable Baroness Xenie Karovitch.

This tireless queen of fashion had filled the house with her own cheerful entourage; and, with a watchful prevision, Madame Anykoff was the ever-present chaperon, on the occasions when Xenie slipped away to a petit déjeuner with the bank director, or else to meet him, by well-arranged chance, at some glittering dinner.

Nightly, the distinguished financier was seen leaning over the gilded chair of the Baroness at the opera or theater, while Madame Anykoff sung the praises of this fairy godmother to the orphan now nestling in her old home with a trustful heart.

As a first fruit of victory, Baroness Xenie proudly displayed the Souvaroff diamonds, the famous ruby necklace, or the great collar of pearls in the northern Vanity Fair, and la Signora Coralba set her pearly teeth in a useless rage to see the vanished gems shining down upon her from Xenie's opera box.

By a judicious legerdemain, Matthias Weinstock had been released under espionage, and "l'affaire Kriloff" was already an open scandal of the courts and financial circles.

The resolute Kalomine was hewing, hip and thigh, the detected usurers who had basely abandoned the humble Weinstock to the blasts of adversity.

There was an unwonted animation in the Place Michel on the afternoon when a superb troika of black Orloffs drew up before the grand entrance and the Cossack escort gathered around the courtyard when His Highness, the Grand Duke Anatole, descended, in stately fashion, from his superb sleigh.

As the Grand Duke's adjutant proudly passed up the marble stair bearing his imperial master's personal card, the house servants, all en grande tenue, were marshaled in the halls.

And, beaming with smiles, the Baroness Xenie, a dream of sinuous beauty, received her princely visitor in the grand old drawing-rooms.

With a courtly gallantry, the tall scion of the Romanoffs bent over the jeweled hand of the loyal châtelaine, who welcomed him to the home of the Kriloff's and Souvaroff's, who, for generations, had given their best blood to the service of the White Czar.

"Kalomine has told me of the attempted outrage," graciously said the Grand Duke; "and if you will state the precise facts to me, I will be only too glad to entreat the Emperor's bounty, and to obtain for you the desired order!"

The alert woman, leading her royal guest to the library, soon traversed the ground-work of the meditated iniquity.

"Very good," musingly said His Highness. "If you will be good enough to send in your name to the Emperor's private secretary to-morrow at ten o'clock, I shall be in attendance upon my august uncle. I will have the honor to present you and second your request. I am in attendance to-morrow at the Winter Palace to settle the matter of the summer changes of command. Shall we see you at Rovno? Wraxine will certainly be on duty there! He has begged the command," musingly said the Grand Duke. "There is a huge military cantonment to be built; millions of roubles will be spent there! Forty thousand troops will

be gathered there, and I shall command the maneuvers."

"I did think of taking the villa of Prince Lubomirski," answered Baroness Xenie, with sudden blushes. "That is if your Highness—" she stopped short in confusion.

"I hope that we shall have our little Tiflis circle all reunited there," continued the Grand Duke. "Wraxine is very anxious for the command; he has his enemies, of course, who has not, but—" with an instant courtesy, the Grand Duke sprang to his feet as Marie Kriloff silently entered the room.

She paused in a sudden astonishment at the sight of this towering young cavalier, whose cold, blue eyes, strong features, close-cropped hair, and sweeping cavalry mustache indicated the soldier.

But the imperial crown upon his golden shoulder-straps; the three grand crosses of Russia's proudest orders on his gray uniform, attested the imperial blood.

Stalwart young Romanoff, the Grand Duke, stood there transfixed by the lovely vision.

The afternoon ride had brought back the faint roses to Marie's pallid cheek; the golden-brown hair rippled over her Greek brows, and the tender, appealing light of her liquid brown eyes thrilled the princely visitor.

Tall, beyond the average height of women, with an ideal grace of form, her dark robe throwing out in startling relief the exquisite delicacy of her lovely face, Marie Kriloff looked an angel, and walked a queen.

With a proud humility, she dropped her eyes before the ardent gaze of the young prince, and then, rising in her confusion, glided away with a stately salutation, after the wondering Xenie had presented her beautiful charge.

With ready gallantry, the Grand Duke had escorted the youthful beauty to the arched portière, and as he sprang back to Xenie Karovitch's side, he murmured:

"Au revoir, then; at the Winter Palace! To-morrow shall be your day of victory! Tell me—why have I not before met this Hebe, ever fresh and fair?"

The Grand Duke's brow lightened as he heard the story of the young girl's orphanage.

His voice was earnest in some newly formed purpose as he hoarsely whispered:

"Wraxine has privately told me of all his wishes! He is coming here, incognito, in two weeks to urge his claims to the Rovno command! If you will come to us, and cheer the Volhynian loneliness—if you will bring Baroness Marie to the Lubomirski villa—you may now write to Wraxine that I shall make the selection so dear to his heart!"

Their eyes met in an unspoken bargain, and then Xenie Karovitch was left, with a wildly beating heart, alone at her drawing-room door!

"It is the call of Fate," she murmured. "It means power, wealth, a golden future to Wraxine; luxury to me! Oh! for an hour alone with him! Kalomine must never know!"

And then, the busy devil of avarice and the lust of pleasure tempted Xenie Karovitch to the sale of a human soul! The dark way was open!

CHAPTER III.

AMONG THE ROSES AT ROVNO.

With an assumed artlessness, Xenie Karovitch affected to ignore the visit of the Grand Duke at the dinner, where, by a happy accident, Madame Anykoff diverted the mind of Marie from the personality of the imperial visitor.

"It is a case of arrested development," mused the woman of the world, slyly watching her unassuming charge.

In the days of their rapprochement, Baroness Xenie had, so far, failed to draw out the "inner woman" hidden in the young girl's untroubled breast.

Swept by the fierce storms of a life of pleasure, the agitated woman tried all the evening in her opera box to recall her own vacuity of mind after the six years'

isolation of the Catherine Institute. And this orphan Marie had only left the semi-military discipline of the great seminary to drop into the death-in-life of her father's lonely household.

While the sorrows of Gilda moved hundreds of gentle bosoms, Baroness Xenie, all insensible of Kalomine's whispered tenderness, pondered over the visit to the Winter Palace. She dared not follow out the young Grand Duke's obvious meaning, and yet she found that, in her own future, Marie Kriloff was suddenly selected by chance to be the architect of either Wraxine's ruin or fortune.

The long vigils of the night brought no counsel, and, with paler cheeks than her wont, Xenie Karovitch dressed for the informal presentation to the Czar.

She herself stood at the parting of the ways! There was Kalomine's reawakened tenderness! She knew, alas, the insecure tenure of a middle-aged voluptuary's heart.

"He knows all my life since the deadly ball of a dueling Frenchman swept poor Feodor out of my arms into an early grave! And, tied down by the demands of his great financial trust, he would never dare to marry me! There is a quicksand beneath my feet. Marie would surely be an incumbrance to us; she would, at last, penetrate our secret! And even Kalomine's chivalry can not guard my name here in Petersburg, where every other attendant is a spy! And—Wraxine, too—his rage on a discovery of my double dealing might cost both these men their lives! I would then be disgraced, exiled; perhaps imprisoned! And what will be the future with Wraxine—dependent on his heartless nature! He would cast me off in a moment if his devil of jealousy ever breaks loose! But, with Marie as a safety anchor—owing his place and command to her, through the sudden fancy of the Grand Duke—he would not dare to abandon me! If I could but see him—" hardened as she was, she dared not write the guilty thoughts which now thronged her brain.

"This money recovered from these usurers will pay some of my pressing debts, and float Marie and I for

a season or two. She would be a bond between Wraxine and myself. He would then be forced to consider me, and I can surely trust to Kalomine!"

She was still in an agony of doubt as she descended from her sleigh on the Place Razvodni.

But the gentleman in waiting hurried her on through the great white ballroom to the Emperor's private cabinet.

She scarcely dared raise her eyes as the Grand Duke led her into the presence of the ruler of eighty millions.

Answering in monosyllables, she saw at once how the way had been made smooth for her.

"I shall hope to know this poor orphaned girl married to one of my household," said the kindly autocrat. "And, we will not ourselves forget her future! The order shall be delivered to you forthwith."

It was only when she was walking down the long corridor that Baroness Xenie felt her heart bound in a sudden delight.

"I telegraphed Wraxine last night to come instantly to Moscow," slowly said the Grand Duke Anatole. "He will be there in a week, and you can see him if you go down! Remember what I said last night. Let him at once telegraph his application privately to me here upon his arrival, after you have conferred with him. The corps commander at Rovno will have an important trust! And a cardinal point is, that he should be married! You understand my wishes."

The full purpose of the speaker flashed upon the agitated woman's mind. And as her better angel struggled with her, she recalled Michel Wraxine's stormy pleadings:

"With you, I can win! There will be hundreds of thousands of roubles to be gathered up in the great operations there of building the establishment of a permanent corps. You and I need each other! We both know the true elixir of life! There is nothing but gold—it is the only talisman, and there is but one way for you and I to reach the gold we need! One season's command there, and your debts—my own—will vanish like dew on the desert sands!"

"Meet him there," placidly murmured the Grand

Duke; "and on your return I will again dine with you! General Wraxine shall find his appointment awaiting him; but, only on your promise to me."

The startled woman murmured a few words as to Marie's period of mourning.

"There would be a few months' delay, Your Highness," she faltered.

"But, you will surely come to Rovno and bring her. Your life at Villa Lubomirski shall be a paradise. I ask no more than that! Wraxine understands me very well," the young prince said, his face darkening in an angry scowl.

Only the keen-eyed woman there knew that while Kalomine was the purveyor of the Grand Duke's purse, that General Baron Michel Wraxine had been his ame damnée. For the Emperor Alexander III was a stern arbiter of social purity, and the faithful husband of the beautiful Dagmar was feared by the social wrong-doer.

"Remember, now, that your future is in your own hands," briefly concluded the preoccupied young man. "I expect to hear from you next, in Moscow."

The Baroness smiled her assent as she left her tempter.

As the sleigh dashed along over the Place du Palais, the paper hidden in Xenie Karovitch's bosom weighed upon her bosom like lead. She sighed as she thought of the fearful price to be paid.

Truth and honor, her womanly loyalty, and the sacrifice of an unstained soul!

But, suddenly, she saw hanging far above her in the pale green skies, the flashing dome of St. Isaac's hanging in the ether, gleaming with the golden spoil of Napoleon's buried army.

"There is nothing but gold," she murmured. "Even the cross there is golden; and for this golden harvest I will go on to the end!"

As her sleigh drew up before her own door, an old woman, clad in tattered rags held out a withered hand for alms. Tossing the crone a rouble, Xenie Karovitch lightly ascended the stairway. Her last scruple

had vanished ; and, then, throwing her arms around the beautiful orphan, she betrayed her with a kiss.

Once launched upon the downward current, impelled by the thirst for place and power and pleasure, the reckless woman lost the voice of conscience.

When she deposited the priceless paper with Director Kalomine in the early afternoon, she smiled at his gloomy misgivings over her voyage to Moscow.

“Affaires de famille, mon cher,” she laughingly said. “You can press on the business during my absence; and if you are out of sight, you will not be out of mind; for I shall write you daily.”

He knew now the promise of her eyes.

A week later, Madame Xenie Karovitch breathlessly awaited the arrival of General Wraxine in her splendid rooms at the Slaviansky Hotel in Moscow, for the energetic general had hastened on from Tiflis, his ambition fired with the Grand Duke’s telegram.

A certain familiarity with the idea had already robbed the proposed hidden maneuver of its initial blackness in the desperate woman’s mind.

Greedy of pleasure, improvident and reckless, she only knew that the lamp of Aladdin was being robbed for her; and while Kalomine ardently longed for her return, all St. Petersburg now knew that the Grand Duke Anatole’s sleigh daily followed Madame Barbe Anykoff’s superb equipage in the afternoon parade upon the Naberejnaia.

But, while maids of honor laughed, and gallant courtiers smiled, no one saw Marie Kriloff’s slender, dark-robed form, muffled under her fleecy Circassian shawl, nestling at the side of the full-blown dame de société. And already, in far-away Rovno, the voice of Spring was whispering over the silent fields! The tender leaves were beginning to faintly unfold their living green, and the life of another dreamy summer was beginning to stir in the still leafless rose alleys of Prince Lubomirski’s gardens.

It was a fierce passion-play of two human tigers there that hour, when Michel Wraxine gazed into Xenie Karovitch’s welcoming eyes on his arrival from the trackless southern plains.

Rugged and sturdy was the hardy soldier at fifty-three; his iron-gray mustache sweeping over pitiless lips.

With a score of stars and medals gleaming on his broad breast, the round Tartar head, his small, deep, sunken eyes, and heavy jaws, showed all the signs of his relentless Kalmuck ancestry.

Master of all the arts of camp and court; a profound voluptuary and a Machiavelli of dissimulation, Wraxine's sword had bravely carved out his pathway of fortune from the Crimea to Samarcand, and from the Caucasus to Plevna.

Bold, relentless, and unmindful of all obstacles, he now aspired to the almost boundless power of a corps commander; and yet, he started back as the tempting woman unveiled in shamefaced words the hidden conspiracy against the dark-eyed orphan.

The purple veins in Wraxine's face were swollen as he strode up and down the gaudy hotel parlor, vainly striving to ignore the infamy of the secret conspiracy for the unwitting dishonor of Demetrius Kriloff's lonely child.

"Tell me—tell me, Xenie," he cried, grasping the shrinking woman's jeweled hands, "is this your own devilish work?"

And, yet, base as she was at heart, the woman at his side told the truth when she murmured:

"No! He would have it so!"

"I must think—think!" growled the man, who feared to face the dread alternatives. "It is a golden future for us both! There is wealth and power; but is there no other way?"

The strong man groaned in his rage. He gazed down into the trembling woman's eyes.

"No mortal must ever know of this. It binds you to me forever—in heaven and hell, to eternity."

"When will you telegraph?" muttered Xenie Karovitch, aghast at the frenzy of her saturnine lover.

"Let me think all over!" cried Wraxine. "There is ruin staring us in the face, unless I get this profitable command. You are cribleè with debt. I am on the brink of a final plunge! Our fortunes are linked to-

gether now for life—to the very last! But, without your aid, I can never reach this pinnacle! Once there, by Heaven, he shall never displace me! He would not dare—”

“ Ah! Michel,” sighed the frightened woman; “ what hidden means of vengeance are in his hand! It is a fearful climax! For, if you refuse, I shall never trust myself again on the Neva. I will leave Russia and hide myself in Austria or Italy! I would some day suddenly disappear; torn out of the busy glare of life, never to be heard of more! Leave me until to-morrow, and if you decide to act, come to me when it is done! Otherwise we part here for life, and I will steal secretly over the frontier! I dare not return to the Place Michel! Barbe Anykoff will give Marie a shelter, and then, perhaps, her face will win her a place in the world of fashion! As for me, I can not go back! I fear to go forward, for, something tells me of a fearful retribution!”

The two who shared the awful consciousness of a nameless design, now felt, for all their world-hardened recklessness, the shame of Adam and Eve; for they had discovered to each other the unpardonable sin, the crushing out of the fair rose of life, blossoming in white purity in the heart of the orphaned beauty, whose stately seclusion had kept her unsullied by sin; unsinged by the fierce furnace heat of the passion storms of the Neva!

And they dared not voice in words the compact which was to be sealed only by guilty eyes; the tacit consent of fallen angels.

“ I have to pay my respects here at the palace, Xenie,” muttered General Wraxine; “ and you know the tongues of Moscow’s gossips can bruit a dangerous secret, far beyond the clangor of the bells of her four hundred churches. I shall affect a great military preoccupation here! You and I must not be seen together! Make the round of all your friends! Show yourself at the theater, opera, and ball. Should we meet, merely notice me, en passant! If,” he hesitated, “ I decide to apply, then I will send you, to-morrow morning, a basket of Parma violets before noon! I

shall not come to you here again. A thousand jealous eyes are upon me, for your sake, bel demonio!"

He strode up and down in an agony of indecision.

" You say that you will not go back to the Neva," he grumbled, at last. " The girl is left penniless by Demetrius's death; you have no money; you are even deeper in the black gulf of debt than I am! Now, if you leave Russia, how would she live?"

Xenie Karovitch murmured: " She might be named a maid of honor," the woman faltered.

" Yes, and the merciless Grand Dukes would soon chase her from the Winter Palace; or, draw a line through her name on the list! Marie is absolutely penniless; what would you do with her if you fled to France, Austria, or the Riviera? She would be merely a clog upon you. You say that she is *au fond de cœur*, intractable! *En femme galante*, you," he smiled bitterly, " would reign easily for a few years out of Russia, et après?"

Xenie Karovitch was now sobbing bitterly.

" You know that she would be at once chased out of Petersburg if you left her there penniless," continued the remorseless officer; " and, an ingenue with you would be a millstone around your neck if you seek les bonnes fortunes abroad!"

The General closed his golden cigarette-case with a smart clash as he said:

" And if she must make her own way in life, as penniless beauties have to, she could never make three fortunes in one, and find a secure protection in a powerful friend placed high above all the shocks of fortune!"

" You are right, Michel," desperately said the tortured Baroness Xenie. " But, only from one stand-point! Don't you see that we are hopelessly ruined, you and I, unless we bend this girl to our will! And dare you show her the path which lies before her!"

They saw each others unveiled souls, naked in all the ghastly moral leprosy of the golden code.

" She must find it out for herself!" brutally ejaculated the Tartar General. " Later—bit by bit! The path of life is a curve! Of course, there would be fet-

ters; but golden ones!" hoarsely murmured the voluptuary. "Neither of us dare formulate, in words, what the Grand Duke leaves unspoken! To put it fairly—in any other way—she will be crushed under the iron heel of misfortune—should she be self-poised, she can rule this golden future, live under the diamond shower, and then, the element of adverse fate is eliminated!"

But, Xenie Karovitch, gazing stubbornly out at the polyglot medley of the Slaviansky Bazar, was silent!

"*Après tout*," growled Wraxine. "You only show her the helplessness of an absolute penury! I will see that you are *bien rangée*! For all you know, Marie Kriloff may be a very Circe. She is of your own blood!"

"Let her pick her own way over life's hot ploughshares! Listen! I will send a telegram to-morrow to St. Petersburg. You must remain here a week after I am called there. Let the Grand Duke play his rôle of Faust!"

"If I am named to this command, you must be a stranger to me, at least until the *Gazette* has noised the affair abroad! But, if I am named, I will at once send you that peerless Circassian set of turquoises and diamonds, wrenched from old Schamyl's favorite sultana—let it be the token of our victory! Stay here till you hear from me!"

"If I am gazetted, I shall—at once—secure the Lubomirski villa; I will avoid using any names with His Highness! You can do the same—serpent as you are! *Bien connu*, that if I reign at Rovno, you bring this pale blossom with you."

"To master her, let her never forget her dependence on you for money, every trouble!"

The artful noble sneeringly said: "She will soon develop, with emulation, her desire for luxury, in the brilliant circle of a corps headquarters, where a hundred beauties angle for the Grand Duke. Once en train, then leave the future to me! *Je m'en charge de tout!*"

"And I am, then, to be passive?" murmured Xenie, her eyes flashing in a somber light!

"You are to be the power behind the throne—you

are to rule—you are the only woman on earth fit to share this last forlorn-hope dash for fortune!"

"As for Marie, laissez faire is all you need! Let her have her head—you will know the token of the violets, and the meaning of the jewels!"

"But, on your life, not one word of detail to the Grand Duke if I am named. Let him take it all for granted; let him build the pyramid of our fortunes while he fabricates his own Châteaux en Espagne!"

"It is the unpledged trinity of a silent alliance! You and I only gain strength and become fixed, immovable, by his closing the other point and angle!"

Right wisely had Michel Wraxine judged the cowardly course to pave the way for a final victory.

It was after a night of revel that Xenie Karovitch found, at noon, the princely corbeille of dark-blue violets in her salon, with neither card nor token!

Steeped in Moscow's gayest pleasures, she felt that the great game of infamy was now being played for her, with no stake up on her own account.

And, with a feverish zest, she followed up every mad distraction of the semi-Asiatic metropolis, until the drama of the future should unroll the first act of its passion play on the icy banks of the still frozen Neva.

A sudden turn of Fortune's wheel hardened the heart of the conscience-shaken woman.

Alexandre Kalomine's letter of triumph was a secret recall to the desperate intrigante, whom the headlong young Grand Duke vainly fancied a mere puppet in his own hand.

Xenie Karovitch read with a wild elation the letter which recounted the abject surrender of the usurers, who had been smitten with a sudden terror by the fear of full revelations by the cowardly Weinstock.

"There are two hundred thousand roubles now available to your credit," wrote the banker, "and the privilege of the Kriloff apartment, rent free, as long as the Excellence Marie or yourself cares to use it! But, one condition is asked—they wish to be saved from all criminal prosecution! And, so they have consented to pay over fifty thousand roubles more for Baroness Kriloff's title to the Maison Kriloff and to give up

the claims on the furniture and personal property! But, they will only do it through me, in confidence, and they ask me to deliver the moneys over to you! We must do the best we can, for, at the last, we have no legal evidence of the extortion, and poor old Demetrius really signed away his birthright to the last cent!

"It is only, then, fear of Weinstock's confession that forces them to disgorge! And you can make it so easy for me! If all is made over to you, it will appear as if you had bought back the household, and redeemed the jewels to aid your orphaned relative!"

"And—she can safely be left to fancy that you are her benefactress! The moneys are here all ready at my disposition, to be privately handed to you! And all that you must do is to persuade Mademoiselle Kriloff to sign over all her claims—you being her tutrice, the whole thing is final! But, the girl must know nothing! For, in any other form, the money-brokers would be left helplessly adjudged criminals! Telegraph me simply 'yes' if you will aid me, and so close the whole affair! Act quickly—for there is one desperate remedy left to the usurers!"

"For fifty roubles, Weinstock could be easily poisoned, or strangled in his prison, and the word 'suicide' scratched on the register of the civil prison! Then they would all be safe—Marie would be impoverished, and you would be left penniless with a helpless charge on your hands!"

Xenie Karovitch sat long, alone, pondering over the banker's letter; for there was a new prospect in life now opened to her. Fate had thrown the beautiful orphan into her hand as a bond slave!

It was the strangest turn of Fortune's wheel! The dark shadows had hidden the golden domes of the Kremlin before the desperate woman had made her choice of the ways!

"With this secret, I can easily rule Kalomine," she mused. Wraxine's cold brutality had reminded her of her slight tenure upon the ambitious general!

"He only wants to fill his pockets with the loot of this vastly important command! He shall never know

of this strange windfall! And, as long as I have this gold, I am able to cope with either! Marie Kriloff must never know of this secret pact! And Kalomine will never dare to tell her, for he is my slave!"

The golden current seemed to flow toward her by fortune's merest chance! Xenie's heart hardened as she recalled Wraxine's bitter words—"Gold alone rules the camp and court! It gilds the Pope's tiara, the Czar's crown; the car of Love rolls on golden wheels, and—nothing lasts but gold!"

And so she dared not put away the glittering bribe which had drowned the last voice of a natural affection.

The earnest pleadings of Kalomine for her return recalled the danger of her situation. She resolutely telegraphed the word "yes" which bound Marie Kriloff as a hostage of evil fortune, in absolute dependence upon the spendthrift beauty's will.

Four days later, Madame Karovitch started up, with a wildly beating heart, as General Wraxine's adjutant presented himself before her, in campaign garb.

"Pardon, Excellence," murmured the graceful officer. "I only bear this package and the general's greetings. This letter will explain the sudden orders which will enforce the absence of Baron Wraxine until the new corps is concentrated at Rovno. The Gazette of next week will contain the official announcements, and, by that time, the First Division will be quietly concentrated at Rovno, without attracting the watchful enmity of the German War Office. The general is already at Warsaw, traveling incognito, by special train; and I am bidden to take my leave and join him later, at Odessa."

Left alone, with impetuous haste, the Muscovite beauty tore open the pacquet. There, before her, lay the historic jewels which, hidden for a quarter of a century, had been the richest spoil of the venal soldier's rule in Circassia.

All the vain coquettices of the dashing Delilah had never brought her brutal admirer to this access of generosity, until the web of fate began to enmesh the girl whose surprised glances had fired a royal heart.

There was a little scrawl, which told nothing but a secret to be kept from the whole world ; the raison d'être of General Baron Michel Wraxine's brilliant advancement ; the sudden recognition of his incontestable military merit !

"The Lubomirski villa is yours—for a year from June 1st." So ran the fateful words. "You will bring your personal household only ; all else is provided. A thousand envious eyes are now fixed on me. Write nothing ! Necker & Co., bankers, have an open account for you."

"Victoria !" cried the happy woman, as she read the last lines. "I am not to see you until you are established in your Rovno home. *Après, ça roulera !* Come to me there with the roses ! You have nothing to say—no pledges to make !"

Xenie Karovitch pressed down the swelling pride of her triumphant heart, as she rang for her maid.

"Have all ready ! We go back to St. Petersburg to-night," said the woman, who now saw her pathway of triumph reaching out far into a glorious future.

A new dehumanizing sense of power entered the busy brain of the triumphant schemer as she was restlessly watching, that night, station after station fly by, as the train sped along homeward from Moscow.

The giant plot of Wraxine and his associates was now clear to the Egeria of the new corps commander. For, it was Necker & Co. who would secretly handle the profitable intrigues of the enormous construction and supply contracts of a great, new military center.

"A la bonheur," laughed Xenie. "Kalomine will continue to handle the Grand Duke's private money affairs, but Wraxine has slyly dug under all their mines ! And all my secrets will be safe now, for the great house of Necker will be a bulwark to my protector. For, they are to be the architects of our new fortunes."

The woman recognized Wraxine's deep dexterity in avoiding the breath of scandal.

The careful avoidance of herself until the service of the Czar should bring him to Rovno ; the iron grip of silence upon all relations with the grand ducal deus

ex-machina, and the provision for an easy apprenticeship of the simple-hearted Marie Kriloff to a life of luxury, was craftily done!

"All this is as it should be!" mused the noblewoman. "She will drift along into her place in the game; after that she can play her cards for herself! She may not need my helping hand—pride and rivalry will carry her along fast enough!"

A week after the return of Madame Karovitch from Moscow, the *Gazette de Petersbourg* duly announced the magnificent promotion of General Baron Michel Wraxine to the command of the IX Corps, and its new rendezvous was announced.

Clubs, military circles, and financiers were all agog with the vast designs of the aspiring government, realized in the militarization of the Polish frontier and the frenzied railway construction.

It had been a week of all the joys of a hidden Paradise to Director General Alexandre Kalomine. For, with a tender solicitude, Madame Karovitch had gone over the whole family situation with the beautiful orphan, now blooming under the artful stimulation of Madame Anykoff's lavish hospitalities.

"Teach her to forget herself, my dear Barbe," had been the velvety parting injunction of the artful Xenie. "We live but once, and you and I know, ma chère amie, it is a case of 'après nous—le déluge.'

"I hope to see you another woman, Marie, under the roses of Rovno," was Xenie's summation of her finally imparted plans.

"I have secured the beautiful Lubomirski Villa! We leave here on June first, and there, in happy Volhynia, you shall forget this dark winter city."

It had been easy to explain the necessity of the formal legal papers which the frank-hearted Marie signed without even glancing at them.

The April days fled away, and a sense of restful gratitude now filled the young orphan's heart! It was only from Madame Barbe Anykoff that Marie learned the self-abnegation of Madame Karovitch's lavish preparations for the first acquaintance of the lonely girl with the glittering world of high life.

But, there were undercurrents in the now busy life of the Maison Kriloff! While the orphan was going through a Cinderella process of preparation as to dress and ornament, suited to the modified mourning season, Xenie Karovitch had learned to breathe easily! For, Counselor Matthias Weinstock had disappeared from Saint Petersburg upon the meaning intimation of his resentful principals.

He was now a business agent of the money-brokers at Berlin, dispatched with meaning injunctions never to return to the Neva.

And so, the hoard of Xenie Karovitch at the Imperial Bank was secure at last! There were two hundred and fifty thousand roubles in the rentes of the government, locked up in the sealed iron deposit-box of the victorious intrigant.

Single-hearted and loyal, Marie Kriloff was thankful and rested at heart to know that her own beloved family apartment had been guaranteed to her; that the whole movables of the Kriloff and Souvaroff family were safe and intact, and that her resolute kinswoman had rescued for her the historic jewels which had been the pride of the haughty ancestry whose undisturbed blood flowed in the veins of the dreamy hearted orphan.

Only one touch of womanly weakness rewarded the sleepless traitress who waited for Marie's late awakening.

It was when, with gentle craft, Madame Anykoff had led Marie to the mirror—where, robed like a young queen, all the jewels gleamed upon her exquisite figure.

"You shall be dressed like that, next week," whispered Barbe Anykoff; "for I shall give a dinner to the Grand Duke Anatole, and you must be the Queen of Snows, the Frozen Lily of the Neva."

With a vague alarm, Marie Kriloff gazed at herself; her lip trembled, and she fled away, for memory brought back to her the bold, masterful glances of the pitiless blue eyes!

She had then, with the fine feminine defiance of

nature, for the first time, learned that man had looked upon her, to find her fair.

There were lurid secret chapters in Xenie Karovitch's life as the May days waned and all was ready for the hegira to Rovno.

Alexandre Kalomine had lived these last six weeks in a fever of Elysian delirium. Xenie, now secure in the absence of Michel Wraxine, had riveted up her empire upon the man who was now her abject slave.

The convenient absences upon "affairs" had given the bold schemer a free rein! She had risen above all pecuniary troubles; for she had deeply plunged into her open credit at Neckers.

There were already thousands of artisans delving and hewing at Rovno in the great works of the new corps station.

Railways, fortifications, storehouses, factories, barracks, and a dozen enterprises gave opportunities for the wholesale Russian robbery, at which the ordinary peculator pauses aghast!

Under Michel Wraxine's warrant, screened by the Grand Duke, in whose bosom an insane ardor now dwelt, the banker contractors were lavishing millions, of which golden stream the watchful Wraxine took more than Mosaic tithes.

Kalomine and Xenie were both unwearied in their game of cross purposes. The crafty financier had deceived the woman who now ruled his every waking moment!

It had been only to tie her to his fortunes that he had so arranged the settlement with the vultures of the Kriloff estate, as to put the money, the rightful dower of the helpless orphan, into the hands of Xenie Karovitch.

And now, a new life glowed in the bosom of the reckless woman gamester at Life's fateful board.

She felt all the stimulus of the mighty power of gold! Already, Wraxine, from afar, had sent her the tidings of the coming extinction of her load of debts upon the country estate.

"Keep faith with me—I will with you! When you

come to me, your intendant shall give you the paid discharges of every debt you have in the world!"

The way of life now seemed such smooth sailing that the baroness gladly hailed the coming departure for Rovno.

But one cloud lowered upon her horizon, and that was the pleading of Alexandre Kalomine to be a summer guest of the Villa Lubomirski.

"Alas! You know not what you ask," sighed Xenie. "Remember, that I am alone—only the orphaned girl near me! There is the voice of the cruel world to stifle. You will soon find me in winter snows here again!"

It was on the eve of her departure for the Rovno rose bowers that the tortured man begged her to come to his princely Viborg villa, as his wife.

And he fondly thought it was love shining in her glowing eyes, when she whispered: "Alexandre! I dare not trust myself to even these golden chains! You know not all that I may, one day, tell you! But," the serpent-minded woman laughingly cried, as she returned his kisses, "if I do give my hand in marriage, it will be to you alone, and that, I swear!"

She trembled with delight at the princely gifts which he showered upon her, and yet a cold, mortal fear of Wraxine held her back!

"He would surely kill me," she shiveringly said. "Even though he loves me not! it is his fancy that I should be his tyrant, dupe, and slave!"

With the finest self-protective art, it was Xenie's master stroke to meet, as if, by social hazard, the Grand Duke Anatole, at the princely dinner given by Madame Barbe Anykoff on the last night of their stay in Petersburg.

The nightingales were now calling in the southern woods, and the secretly arranged message at Rovno was awaiting the velvet-eyed châtelaine.

It was well veiled—the insidious approach of the ardent princeling—for, Marie Kriloff, wooed along into a newly unfolding life, standing there under the golden wax lights, merely opened her dreaming eyes in

a vague wonder, as the Grand Duke kissed her jeweled fingers:

"Farewell!" he softly said. "A soldier's farewell—till we crown you queen among the roses at Rovno."

"She will need no leading," mused Xenie, watching the girl, splendid in her jewels, her cheeks lit up with a new-born pride. "She will come under the world's yoke—like the rest!"

CHAPTER IV.

IN GOLDEN FETTERS.

It had been a merry parting from the few friends who saw the train glide away from the crowded station, and Xenie Karovitch sighed in a happy relief when the lights of the Neva faded away behind her!

In the long, seven-hundred-mile trip to Wilna, Dunaburg, and Rovno, the astute baroness would have ample leisure to arrange her future social programme. The fates had been unduly kind to the woman now fighting for fortune within her last citadel of life. There was not a telltale whisper of her secret composition with the usurers who had sucked the life-blood of Demetrius Kriloff.

Whatever private pledges Michel Wraxine had given to the Grand Duke, they were all unknown to Xenie. And it was well, for Wraxine, her tyrant, was of a different world to Kalomine, her unconscious dupe. The one, a military zealot, a mad sportsman, a member of the glittering imperial staff, was a shining light in the highest Russian social coteries; the other, secretive, luxurious, a man of the cabinet, lived in an atmosphere of guarded mystery.

For, a confidant of the highest august personages, the chosen intimate of the powerful cabinet ministers, Alexandre Kalomine always moved "in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform."

Secretly backed by other great moneyed men, he was the head of a powerful financial coterie which al-

ways fought the court and military cabals in an unending triangular duel.

It was true that General Wraxine and the director of the Imperial Bank often met as friendly enemies over the green cloth of the yacht club, for both were inveterate gamesters; but there, only the blind goddess Fortuna ruled—and a ceremonial politeness veiled the universal hatred of all high-class Russians for the money autocrat.

Noble, beauty, official, courtier, general, even those of the imperial blood, feared the secret junta of Petersburg bankers, who were necessarily exempt from all police espionage.

There was ever the steel hand hidden under the velvet glove—and, the warring capitalists were always banded together like Ukraine wolves, in the defense of their own order! And, at any moment, these sons of Mammon could throttle the imperial policy, halt armies, arrest great public works, and even cut off the means of social display or official splendor.

Leaning back on her cushions, Xenie Karovitch secretly watched the beautiful orphan. "I can find out her real character now," the happy intrigante mused, "for, all my bridges are burned behind me! She is isolated from all her old associations, and the glow of pleasure will soon melt the icy reserve of her 'arrested development.' "

Sly and artful, Xenie Karovitch had left Elia and Marie Alexandrowna as guardians of the vast apartments in the Maison Kriloff! "There is no one to babble," was Xenie's quick judgment. Her own maid was a devoted peasant woman, brought up under her own eyes, and bred into that habitual luxury which had been Xenie Karovitch's second life since she had raised her own social pennon of "No surrender."

"I can watch her night and day, for the other servants are Wraxine's own creatures, and so, there is no danger of awkwardness."

With a fine dissimulation, the Grand Duke's only notice of the departure of the object of his secret pursuit had been three exquisite bouquets, delivered by his confidential Swiss to Madame Anykoff, Excellence

Karovitch, and the beautiful Marie, at the station.

The universal chivalry of the Russian character explained the general compliment, and yet, Xenie knew that Marie's superb white rosebuds must have been specially ordered on from San Remo, by telegraph.

For the ice on the Neva had lingered late, and the trees in the great Summer Garden had just shed their winter wraps of twisted straw.

Besides cutting off all possible meddling with her dangerous charge, Xenie Karovitch had arranged for a visit incognito to Alexandre Kalomine's jewel-box villa in Finland. It had all been so deftly arranged!

Madame Barbe Anykoff was to come in August, and be the châtelaine of the Villa Lubomirski, while Xenie could steal away to Viborg, and leave Marie Kriloff to feel herself free and untrammeled in the brilliant summer life of Rovno.

In return for the entrée to the golden summer life of the Volhynian villa, Barbe Anykoff had frankly prepared the unsuspecting Marie for a complete subserviency to her generous aunt, now the good fairy of the girl's brightening dreams.

Madame Anykoff, the widow of a general who had left a fair estate and a substantial pension, failed not to let Marie feel the full measure of her obligations to the seemingly generous Aunt Xenie.

"To have rescued your magnificent jewels; to have recovered your entire family personal property from these wretches; to have secured you a permanent home in the Maison Kriloff, it has been, indeed, a marvelous campaign. If Demetrius had but listened to her, you would not have been left, dowerless and dependent, only upon your aunt's further bounty! Her kindness links you to her side with golden fetters! Never forget that you look to her alone for your future, for fortune, and for your social career."

And Barbe Anykoff's work had been well done! For Marie Kriloff now well knew that, while something had been saved from the wreck of the family fortunes, that it was to Xenie Karovitch she owed all the daily comforts of her brightened life—the splendid out-

fitting which had been forced upon her, and the daily bread, even if broken by a loving hand.

For the sacred seventeen roubles, the last vestige of her departed father's wasted fortune, still remained untouched, as a sad reminder of his unfaithful stewardship.

On this softening night of the awakening summer, as the train sped on through the fragrant birch forests, the voices of the woods, in mystic murmurs, were heralding in the magical season which brings back bud, leaf, and blossom to the tree, the flowers to the meadow, the fragrance of royal-hearted summer to the dreamy forest, and the wild tumult of life's reawakening to the heart of man and maid.

Marie was an embodied vision of grace and beauty as she leaned back, a distinguished figure in her pearl-gray traveling dress, the soft, light, silver-fox furs framing her exquisite face. Xenie secretly contemplated her work with a thrill of pride. "Laissez faire," she murmured to herself, as she nestled deeper in her own cushions. "She will be a queen, my silent pupil! The soul of the rose will soon steal into her tranquil bosom, and she will come into her kingdom, and, in the great game of life, win or lose, she will have walked the pathway of womanhood—to live and love—to live and be beloved!"

And yet, the world-hardened beauty's inmost heart's core thrilled with conscious shame when Marie leaned over to her, and, kissing her brows lightly, murmured: "You are so good to me! I owe all to you—and I shall never forget you!"

The varying scenes of the two days' gliding panorama brought the sparkling light of joy to Marie Kriloff's eyes.

As they sped on through the leafy Volhynian woodlands, past lake and town, flashing green meadows now starred with early flowers, greeted them; the lowing of kine sounded softly on the breeze, and the mantle of spring, unfolding, as they were whirled southward, showed beneath its fleecy folds the exquisite bosom of summer, ardent and glowing.

There was the light of wonderment in Marie Kri-

loff's eyes as the train, rounding many beautiful vistas, drew up where Rovno nestles, by its winding river in the rich Volhynian plains, so loved by the proud old Polish nobility.

There was the white city of a thousand conical tents, sweeping far around the old town, filling the triune valleys, where the copper roofs gleamed like gold in the evening sun; the grouped cupolas of the churches rose, surmounted with gilded crosses, and the sweet, thrilling sound of martial music was wafted, in softened echoes, on the evening breeze.

All around was the lavish fertility of a generous nature, and thatched farmhouse and pretty villa smiled in peace and generous contentment.

"Beautiful! beautiful!" exclaimed Marie Kriloff, as her eyes rested on the proud old Château de Lubomirski, rising on a stately mound, with its velvet lawn sloping to the river encircling the romantic old castle on three sides.

"Beautiful!" involuntarily echoed a score of gallant officers, raising their hats as Excellence Marie Kriloff demurely followed Xenie to the waiting carriage. The girl's witching loveliness had cast a spell upon the chivalric young soldiers, who had found excuses to throng the railway station.

For the splendid equipage, the magnificent, peerless, Orloff trotters, and the two liveried servants had brought Colonel Tcherchinsky, the chef d'état major, to welcome Madame Karovitch to her new summer abode.

All the preux chevaliers knew the dark-eyed Venus Victrix—for the festivities at Tiflis had proved Xenie Karovitch's title to the scepter.

And the glittering general staff, transferred to the new corps in formation, wondered at the touching beauty of the stately girl who passed, with downcast eyes, between the ranks of her stranger admirers.

To Marie, whose longest excursion had been the environs of St. Petersburg, this fair, free land of old Poland, glowing in sunshine, a land of witching moonlight and overhanging silver stars, seemed to be a fairy world—an Elysium.

"With His Excellency's compliments," said the courtly Colonel Tcherchinsky, as he handed the ladies the first fruits of their suzerainty! "The roses of Rovno bloom only for you!"

In martial fashion, the chief of staff rode beside their carriage until the vehicle passed between the lodge gates of the beautifully bowered summer villa now the residence of the Counts of Lubomirski.

The drive for three-quarters of a mile was through long avenues filled with the patient, plodding gray battalions, their twinkling bayonets shining over the blue eyes and yellow locks of the soldiery.

It was a wonder world to Baroness Marie, this medley of life in the lanes of the old city now circled with its huge camps.

Lean, brown Cossack cavalry, wild-eyed Circassians of noble mien, their rich uniforms gleaming with silver; bearded artillerymen in leather jerkins; dashing lancers—and, riding in knots, the splendid officers, whose swords were ready to leap from the scabbard at the nod of the White Czar.

Marie never heard the whispered adieu of the chief of staff as they passed between the statues crowning the lodge gates of the villa. "The General greets you, and he will be here in a fortnight to receive his formal command at the hands of the Grand Duke! I have every order concerning your comfort! There will be a guard of honor always posted at the villa!"

Glowing with triumph, Xenie Karovitch nodded as the two sentinels saluted, and keenly watched Marie while the carriage wound around and around the magnificent ground of fifty acres which surrounded the Lubomirski villa.

The southeast exposure of the superb gardens was sheltered by rolling hills, and the enchanting prospect of the whole river valley to the north, west, and south, was unrolled before them.

The old city lay below them, to the east, the vast camp was unrolled in a stern, martial pageant, and every turn of the winding carriage road disclosed some delicious new vista.

The air of evening was laden with the rich breath of

the royal gardens, and the great, rambling, modern villa stretched out its hospitable arms and wings, among a labyrinth of dells, groves, and lawns. The plashing murmur of water mingled with the soft gurgling cooing of the forest birds.

Here, on this romantic hillside, the Polish Princes Lubomirski, in modern days, had builded this embowered paradise, after the White Eagle was furled forever, and the great ruined castle below was left to its entourage of the town, all of whose native-born citizens had been serfs to the proud Polish family.

Napoleon had marshaled kings on the velvet sward before the old château below, in 1807, and now, after the terrific scenes of the Moscow campaign, and the wild wars of the Polish insurrection, the old château dreamed in the dying sunlight, deserted by all but a faithful family of retainers burrowing in its mossy basements.

"It is an earthly paradise," murmured Marie, as she lightly sprang out upon the broad veranda, where Madame Karovitch's own intendant stood awaiting her. He was a legacy of her old state, before her visits to Paris, her winters on the Riviera, and her battles at Monte Carlo had swept estate after estate into the hands of the money-lenders.

A two years' absence of the widowed Prince Lubomirski, while making a tour of the world with two lovely daughters, had enabled the new corps commander to secure the use of the only modern residence within a hundred square miles.

Cosmopolitan nobles, and of the strictest "high-life" school, the Lubomirskis had filled the rambling villa with every charm of the luxurious later life of this century of gold.

And yet, in the years since the end of the reign of "fire and sword," they had garnered into the jewel-box villa vast stores of the hidden treasures of the old Polish families, now scattered as exiles over the world, or sprinkled through foreign armies, with a silent contingent in Siberia's gloomy stockades.

The vast majority, gone before, were sleeping quiet-

ly in that great national graveyard which is coterminous with vanished Poland.

To Marie Kriloff, whose uneventful life had been dreamed away in the depressing household of the old scholar, this realm of modern luxury seemed a king's palace.

Before the bugles of the encircling camp had sounded "taps," the young baroness had peeped into every fairy nook of the splendid villa.

But one disturbing thought came to vex her! When the dinner was served, in a state which made Marie wonder, a sudden query flashed across her mind. "Whence all this display, the evidence of a costly luxury?"

There was a grave submission on the face of General Wraxine's maître d'hôtel, the footmen were of his own household, and the stable lackeys had seen Madame Karovitch's bewitching face often at Tiflis.

And, fearing the wrath of their stern master, they made no sign save that of implicit obedience.

The orphan stifled the question which trembled on her tongue when she recalled the admonitions of the prudent Madame Anykoff. "I am only a dependent upon Xenie's bounty," mused the startled girl, "and fettered to her by the golden chains of a slavish gratitude."

The perfect social inexperience of the young beauty was a protection to Madame Karovitch in her veiled designs, and a needed one; for, already, at the glittering mess tables of the patrician officers of the corps the wine was quaffed in a toast to the "Unknown Queen of Roses."

As for Madame Karovitch, they smiled in silence and passed the question, for all dreaded the iron disciplinarian who held them as hounds in the leash!

One single awkward affront, and the tiger-hearted general who was the Grand Duke Anatole's "other soul" could send them on a ten years' frontier exile of service in Siberian outposts, or on the yeasty shores of Saghalien.

But, when the moon sailed high over the slumbering camp and the sleeping city, Marie was wandering in

golden dreams, when she was awakened by the exquisite serenade under her windows, the "music in the silent night, which, when the burthened air is spent, bequeathis to memory its delight."

Stealing to the vine-clad window, she watched the lurid glow of a hundred flaming torches, where, by their martial light, the sturdy, ranked soldiers sang the quaint and thrilling regimental songs to whose proud accent the bravest of Russia have died for the Czar on a hundred fields.

The young officers eagerly divided the spoil of the rain of roses which the "Unknown Beauty" timidly dropped among them, and, an hour later, she bowed, in a sudden confusion, at the head of the supper table, when the room rang with the courtly welcome of the assembled cavaliers.

Marie Kriloff's heart beat with new impulses, and a strange fire thrilled her stilled blood as she laid her tired and happy head down upon her pillow.

Led by loving hands into a land of roses, life seemed all fair before her, and her womanly heart beat a sympathetic refrain to the music wafted back in the summer night as the stalwart soldiers marched down through the town, their ringing chorus dying away on the softly murmuring night breezes.

A week ran away, like the fleeting visions of a happy dream! A reflect of the summer roses now shone on the young patrician's cheek; there were all the quaint mysteries of Russian peasant life, the varied pageants of the growing camp; the projected riding and hunting excursions; the visits to the few old feudal manors still spared from Russian rapacity or war's iron heel.

There was a murmur of quickened life in the thrilling flush of the summer nights, when the very sound of the growing corn could almost be heard, so richly laden was the crystal air with light and life.

And, with a rare decision, the cautious Xenie Karovitch saw this human flower unfolding, leaf by leaf, petal by petal, into the peerless bloom of her matchless beauty.

As light footed as the leopard, Xenie Karovitch followed the steps of her lovely charge. There was a dig-

nity in the veiled retirement of the villa, the guard of honor, the daily ceremonial call of the chief of staff, which kept all the frantic Romeos of the great assembling corps at bay.

Though every eye followed the superb carriage wherein Marie gleamed—a pearl by the side of the dashing Excellence Xenie—the Queen of Roses was left to her books and music, her birds and flowers, and the daily discovery of new treasures in the dainty villa.

And, even now, all the noble officers of the Rovno station knew that Baroness Marie Kriloff was still excluded by her mourning from the summer revels, and that, beyond the gravest public ceremonies, that she would be hidden away in that hillside garden to which all eyes turned.

Thousand-tongued Rumor was already busied with her supposed wealth, her manifold charms, and all the attraction of mystery was added to the halo of the Kriloff and Souvaroff lineage.

The happiest day of Baroness Marie's life was the sparkling morning when she first mounted the matchless horse which a professional woman trainer had exercised for a month on the secluded roads around Rovno.

"It is yours, Marie," simply said the secretly delighted Xenie, when the high-spirited girl threw her arms around the good fairy's neck. "I do not wish you, while barred from feast and ball, from all our gayest summer life, to grow weary of your quiet life."

The sister of a soldier, and of a lineage of dauntless personal courage, Marie Kriloff had the true Russian hand with a horse.

And—ever mindful of the jealous eyes of the lesser ladies of the official household—no man but grizzled, old Colonel Tcherchinsky had ridden by the side of the black Orloff with the silver star, as Marie went out on riding forays with Xenie—herself a picture of supple grace, on a matchless chestnut.

It was two days after the arrival of Baron General Michel Wraxine when the twenty thousand men of the splendid corps passed in a stately review before the Grand Duke Anatole and his glittering staff.

The quiet meeting between Xenie and the general, at the railway clubhouse, now exclusively reserved for the general's own private headquarters, was never known, either to the watchful prince or the orphan beauty; for the *maitre d'hôtel*, silent and ever on guard, was Wraxine's sleepless representative in the paradise which he had gathered around the woman who was his secret partner in the desperate game of controlling the Grand Duke's destiny.

After the embattled host had swept by, Marie Kriloff's bosom was thrilled with a first glow of conscious pride when the Grand Duke's cortège respectfully halted as the princely inspector-general rode up to her carriage.

Only General Baron Wraxine accompanied His Highness, as the imperial representative kissed the girl's trembling hand.

When the watchful Xenie presented the mighty corps commander, all that Marie saw was the stern, soldiery face, the gleaming, round, black, Tartar eyes, and the jeweled stars and orders on his broad breast.

"We shall try and make you happy here in our soldiers' camp" said the general to the elated girl, who now saw a hundred envious women gazing upon her uncontested social victory.

"If you desire anything, you must tell me, when I have the honor to accept Madame Karovitch's dinner," gayly said the Grand Duke, leaping on his horse with the grace of a true soldier.

"And, remember, General Wraxine has my orders to carry out your wishes; he only commands the corps; I command him; and you, Excellence Marie, command us both!"

When the two ladies drove home under a gallant escort, Marie Kriloff's eyes were soft and dreamy. Her hands were crossed upon an exquisite bouquet of white roses, which had been sent with the compliments of the Czar's blood-kinsman.

"I owe all this to you!" cried Marie, in a frenzy of delight, when the victorious Xenie Karovitch embraced her protégé as they reached the villa.

Her social campaign had passed the dangerous

point now! The seal of precedence had been set upon them, and the coming dinner was the final stamp of the undisputed queenship of the Volhynian province.

There was but one queen among the roses of Rovno, and into Marie Kriloff's heart was unconsciously stealing the pride of life, and the growing luxury of her daily life fitted her now as if she were the daughter of Cæsar. And so, she began to drift out on the sea of pleasure, with her eyes veiled to all save the roses in her path! As beautiful as a dream, as unsuspicuous as a child!

Four days later, the Villa Lubomirski was the scene of a superb fête. The concealed hand of the corps commander was the active agent in the gala decorations of the villa and the gardens.

The great marquee where the general exercised his official command was deserted, and over the villa proudly floated the yellow imperial family flag, with the double-headed black eagle, the ensign which denoted the presence of a member of the imperial family.

The grounds were filled with a splendid guard of honor, a company of the haughty Tcherkess of the guard, a company of lancers in their blue and silver, a platoon of picturesque Cossacks patrolled each road around the villa gardens, and a troop of the Chevalier Garde, knightly in cuirasses and silver-crested helmets, were ranged upon the broad veranda.

All the patricians of the camp, and the cercle de noblesse knew that, besides the Grand Duke and General Baron Wraxine, only her Serene Highness Princess Natalie Vronsky had assisted at the dinner, where the imperial guest first divided bread and salt with Baroness Xenie Karovitch.

The superb band of the Cuirassiers of the Guard breathed out the wildly heroic martial music, in the rose copses under the windows when the soft voice of the concealed orchestra within had ceased to intone the songs of "love and the pain of love."

With an artful craft, Michel Wraxine had seized upon the presence of that princely bird of passage, the very aristocrat of the haughty higher noblesse, Princess Natalie Vronsky, whose unnumbered estates

stretched from the Urals to the blue Galician mountains and the misty Hungarian hills.

And so, it was this world-famous beauty who watched in silence at the dinner the stately orphan, robed in white silk, with her swan-like neck graced with the Souvaroff pearls.

A knot of the Grand Duke's white roses, alone, graced the sculptured bosom.

"She is too beautiful to be happy," mused the debonnair princess. "Such star-like eyes were surely born for sorrow's clouds. She is a lonely beauty, walking hand in hand with the fatal curse of some unhappy love!"

Marie Kriloff moved as in a dream, her startled soul steeped in all the splendors of the night, the unspoken homage of the throng awing her to a proud reserve.

For, when the Russian national hymn announced the toast to the Czar, the grand evening reception in honor of the Princess Vronsky brought to the Villa Lubomirski all the higher officers of the corps.

The whole country noblesse within a hundred miles rallied, and also the defiant mutine beauties of the feminine military aristocracy, who had gathered at the great summer camp.

The thousand Chinese lanterns in the grounds lit up wondering beauties, sighing under the pleading of scores of cavaliers whose semi-barbaric richness of apparel proved the vast sweep of the Czar's iron truncheon.

It was at the witching hour of midnight when the guests were all marshaled on the emerald lawn before the villa, and then, at the signal of a golden rocket, the grand old ruined Château de Lubomirski, lying below them in the dreaming valley where the whispering river ran among its reeds, leaped out, in lines of living light, a glittering romance of the old.

Two thousand torchmen, disposed on every line of the splendid old Polish stronghold, had ignited their gleaming tapers at the fiery signal.

And then, as the bands struck up a soft adieu, the Grand Duke Anatole, standing between la Princesse Vronsky and the Pearl Queen, turned to the trium-

phant Baron Wraxine. "Mon Général, on ne peut mieux! Votre fête est vraiment magnifique, sans pareil! C'est un soir de Haroun al Raschid."

Then, bending low over the hand of the radiant hostess, the Grand Duke kissed the slender fingers of Madame Karovitch. "I shall soon have my revenge! I shall borrow the old château, and leave the camp, pour le moment, for I am a houseless prince, vowed, as you know, to tent life and the ceaseless journeys of the service of the Emperor. This is your fête, and I will return it in kind!"

When the last escort had clattered away; when the timid nightingales began their plaint once more in the jasmine beneath her windows, Marie Kriloff sat dreaming there in her boudoir, her whole being thrilled with the magnificence of the night's pageant.

She had stolen away from Xenie to still the soft tumult in her heart.

For one secret—the first of her yet untroubled heart life—she had not dared to share with her benefactress.

It was when she had made the tour of the grounds with the Grand Duke that the young prince seized upon the shade of the friendly rose arbor to ask if there were aught in which he might serve the Pearl Queen!

Marie's timid denial brought a meaning smile to his lips!

"Remember, you may ask anything of me. Your brother, Captain Kriloff, died for our house, as the leader of the desperate assault at Geok Tepe! And your brother's sister shall not ask a favor in vain!"

"What more could heart desire?" mused the happy girl, as she fell into the rosy dreams of youth and innocence. This summer of roses seemed to be the very flower of her life, and she now moved in a world to which her old life seemed to be but a dark background of unforgotten sorrows, a round of dull prison days.

The days swept on into weeks, and, debarred by the etiquette of mourning, Marie Kriloff's only loneliness was on the nights when Xenie Karovitch led the stately minuet or witched all beholders in the wild mazurka with General Baron Michel Wraxine as her only partner.

Utterly unsuspicious, while joining the forays of the Riding Club of the Ladies of the Corps, Marie, bounding along on the fleet-footed Selim, never knew of the long tête-à-têtes of the artful Xenie with the Baron Wraxine at his superb personal headquarters.

There was a private entrance to the magnificent mansion in the village, reached through its semi-public gardens, and the existence of which not even the captain of Wraxine's bodyguard had ever dreamed.

But, the maître d'hôtel, who always stood, gravely mute, behind Baroness Xenie's chair at the villa, knew who had handed her the key of the well-hidden portal.

The Grand Duke was a shooting star, his range from Petersburg to Odessa, from Warsaw to Moscow and Orenburg, being covered by his special train, which bore him along with lightning speed on the mysterious mandates of the mighty Czar!

And yet, Marie Kriloff was vaguely conscious that she was not forgotten, for, thrice a week, the same courier brought the white roses of San Remo to the Pearl Queen.

"He must have loved my brother," dreamily said Marie, who was lost now in the steady swing of the luxury-haunted days.

She had learned to admire the fiery activity of General Wraxine.

From dawn till dark, the indefatigable commander was in the saddle. The blazing sun of high summer was now turning the waving billows of wheat to gold, and the plains were flecked with the blood-red poppy far and wide.

But the pageantry of mimic war went on! The air thrilled to the singing bugles; there were great, gray squares of glinting bayonets, on upland and plain; charging squadrons wheeled under the arching sabers; the wild artillery careered along in clouds of sulphury smoke wreaths, and the hundred-colored uniforms gleamed for miles around the rose park.

In the old city, the streets were blocked up with huge trains; raw, red forts leaped out of the green, a grim girdle of intricate geometry; thousands of moujiks toiled upon the vast yellow barracks, and great

casernes were now making a veritable stronghold of the sleepy Volhynian town.

And, while forges blazed by night and day; while hundreds of anvils rang; while bridge and factory, huge bakery and storehouse; new railway lines and immense stables, spread over miles of the vicinity; followed by his glittering staff, Michel Wraxine galloped here and there, the one directing mind of the great community under the fluttering war flags.

Courteous, chivalric, and unwearied in kindness, the artful general had never broken in upon Marie Kriloff's privacy, other than to anticipate her every wish, when he could in any way divine the orphan's timid preferences.

It all seemed to Marie like the "baseless fabric of a dream," which would some day roll away and leave her alone, a self-compelled prisoner in the darkened apartment on the dreary Neva, her horizon bounded again by the glimpses of the Place Michel, or the varying incidents of the crowds pouring along under her lonely window-seat!

And yet, into her every fiber the luxury of power, of splendor, of all that gold brings, had silently eaten as the fever of the Maremma poisons the blood of the Tuscan peasantry.

Marie Kriloff's education had for its range only the graceful generalities of the Catherine Institute, the languages, and graces, music, and an emasculated course of belles lettres.

Utterly ignorant of the hard world, she had been denied a mother's care, the healthful contact of household affection, and her high-spirited nature had passed by the meaner arts of the coquetry and duplicity bred by the stifling moral atmosphere of the Russian salon!

And now, a woman in heart, soul, and pulse, she drifted into the breakers of life with only a child's perceptions!

It had never occurred to her to ask for the reason of Xenie Karovitch's influence over the fiery Wraxine. She questioned not the general's singular interest in herself, nor the gracious Grand Duke's suppressed ardor! Removed by her stately mourning from the wild

whirl of dashing *déjeuners*, brilliant balls, and “petit diners,” where the mask was dropped, she stood, a white-winged angel, on the brink of the dark tide of rose-red love and intrigue sweeping around her, and walked blindfold among the temptations of the seething Vanity Fair.

And Fate had strangely aided her childlike blindness; for, a dozen secret agents were now hovering around the great human hive of Rovno—the men who were the spies and go-betweens of the mighty bankers, Necker & Co.

General Baron Michel Wraxine bore a restless heart in his bosom! Though he was reaping a golden harvest by pouring the stream of fortune into the hands of his confederates, he shuddered, at night, to dream of that unspoken compact with the Grand Duke!

Though Xenie’s annoying debts were now all paid, though he had discharged all his own long arrears, and even had heaped up a secret golden hoard—for, he rigorously exacted the golden tribute for each tacit infamy—he feared the sudden resentment of the imperial intrigant.

There was a hungry glance in the Grand Duke Anatole’s eyes as he followed Marie Kriloff’s matchless form.

Once, leaning down from his horse, the Grand Duke had whispered to the general: “When shall I hear the wedding bells?”

With a frightened gasp, Wraxine had only answered: “She is an orphan child, yet in mourning!”

And so, when the Field Marshal Grand Duke Anatole had bade adieu to Marie, as he was spirited away to the Caucasus on a secret, lightning quest, he had only murmured to her: “We will meet again on the Neva, surely, for you must be at court this winter!”

The wondering girl never knew of the unending, guilty quarrels of the general and the now puzzled Baroness Xenie.

“I may be relieved at any time,” growled Wraxine. “I see no progress yet in your regard! Let but the blow fall; though I may be sent to dream out my life watching a horde of Siberian convicts, you, miladi,

will fall back into the tortures of poverty, obscurity, and the fangs of these women over whom you lord it now."

True to herself in all her complicated treason of life, Xenie Karovitch suddenly resolved to let her haughty tyrant feel the pangs of absence and an unnamed jealousy.

It was in the early days of August that she sped away to keep her tryst with Kalomine in the land of the silvery Finnish lakes.

"Mon ami," she whispered warningly to the fretful Michel Wraxine, "remember, Barbe Anykoff will be the faithful guardian of Marie here at the Villa Lubomirski. The Grand Duke may return. You will have daily access to my home! One awkward step, one lifting of the veil, and you will seal your own ruin! The Grand Duke may alarm her with a single look. There's a high soul, an unexplored passion, a heart brave, *quand même*, in that girl's bosom. Golden fetters will not hold her! I may lead her up to the altar later, to meet you there willingly. Beware of the heavy band!"

And so, rejoicing in her secretly acquired double fortune, Xenie left him puzzled.

CHAPTER V.

THE BAL DE NOBLESSE—AN ADDITION TO THE STAFF.

When Marie Kriloff welcomed the arrival of the bright-hearted Madame Barbe Anykoff, she little dreamed of the real purpose of the Baroness Xenie's visit to St. Petersburg.

Wraxine's velvet-eyed confederate had given to Madame Anykoff those secret injunctions regarding the young beauty which were worthy of a woman "*qui connaît bien son Russie.*"

And Xenie feared not to leave the vivacious widow in close proximity to General Wraxine.

She herself had become absolutely necessary to the

corps commander by the secret commerce with the agents of the speculating Neckers.

She had a knowledge of all his corruption in the great contracts, now mounting high in the millions of roubles.

"I can not trust to his love, but only to his living fear of losing the lucrative corps command," she mused. "And, as for Marie"—the intrigant rightly judged—"she is safe, for both Wraxine and the Grand Duke would fear Barbe's unerring blue eyes, laughing though they be! She is one of the sterling old Boyar noblesse, and no slavish worshiper of the Romanoffs."

With a keen sagacity, Xenie had sent her maid on, a day before, to St. Petersburg to inspect the Kriloff ménage, and so, she was unwatched as she happily made her way back to the Neva to meet the love-haunted Kalomine.

A telegram from Wilna caused the Director General of the Imperial Bank to steal away to Viborg, and leave the coast clear for a coup d'audace which Wraxine's gloomy forebodings had forced upon her.

She was carefully guarded by her intendant only, as she thought, with a glow of satisfaction of the lightly-won hundred and fifty thousand roubles, which she had taken with her in her jewel-case.

"There is always a line of retreat open to the good general," she pondered, and yet, in some unexplained way, she began to fear a disaster in the career of the bold-hearted Wraxine.

"I am free of all unworthy compacts," she mused, "Marie is still a terra incognita to me! If she has a heart, it has never spoken yet! And I have not yet won her whole confidence! She may be under that satiny skin—as cold at heart as Peter's granite statue! The rage of the Grand Duke may fall first upon Wraxine; it must not fall upon me! And if they meddle with this strange girl until I can lead her into the freedom of marriage, I will lose her forever, and then my court life is at an end! For the Grand Duke Anatole would hound me from the Winter Palace! He knows too much of my past." She confessed this with guilty blushes which left her cheeks aflame!

"There is but one to whom I can safely turn—Kalmine! The very ministry fear him, and even the Neckers need the help of the Imperial Bank. He shall be my last citadel of refuge! And if I do go over to him, it is with all the vital secrets of the Necker ring of contractors, and the proofs of all these piled-up frauds."

Heartless au fond, and ready to abandon Marie Kriloff at the first sign of her intractability; yet, for her own future, Xenie Karovitch decided to let Baron Michel Wraxine alone, act the ignoble part in which he was cast in the dark drama. For well she knew that such women as herself could not safely hunt in couples!

By a double treason, General Wraxine handed Madame Barbe Anykoff a package on behalf of the Grand Duke Anatole, with a note sealed with the imperial arms, on the very same sunny afternoon that Madame Karovitch entered the private office of the almost invisible banker, August Necker, at St. Petersburg.

The cool, old financier was swept from his icy reserve when the audacious Baroness quietly informed him of the impending giving out of the vast contracts for the whole barracks and cantonments of the Second Division of the Rovno Army Corps.

"And, if so, what then, Excellence?" growled the miserly old chief of the vulture gang, now fattening upon the Czar's military chest.

"My influence with the Grand Duke has been asked by others," Xenie sharply said, with an unblushing hardihood.

"I do not choose that General Wraxine, alone, shall profit by your monopoly in Volhynia. I have some pressing debts. I need a large sum of ready money, and if you can not furnish it to me, with no reference to others, why, as I go away to Finland this afternoon, I shall simply place the information which I have of the First Division contracting at the disposition of those who will succeed you!"

"I will then send a cipher telegram to Baron Wraxine," threateningly said the shaken financier.

"Do so!" calmly answered the inexorable woman.

"I shall hear the news from him at once, and I shall surely expose you before sunset to-morrow to one who is nearer the favor of the Emperor than any member of your house. Suppose that the General Baron Wraxine should be suddenly relieved! You would then lose all your vast secret advances to him if I exposed your fraudulently dealings with the government!"

"Woman, what do you mean?" cried the enraged banker, starting up.

"I mean," boldly cried the cunning siren, "that the Grand Duke's heavy hand can only be stayed by me! However, take your choice! You have chosen ruin! So be it!"

Sweeping outward to her carriage, Madame Karovitch halted a single moment at the cashier's desk:

"Send me the balance of my account and all my private papers, instantly, to the Maison Kriloff," she said, coldly.

And it was all in vain that the old millionaire chief of the house stood bareheaded at her carriage door, imploring for a few moments delay.

"You are wise in your own conceit, sir," she cuttingly said. "Wait and see!"

Before Xenie Karovitch stole away in the evening train to Viborg, the humbled chief of the federated army contractors had himself brought to her one hundred and fifty thousand roubles.

"This is mere pin money," laughed the victorious woman. "I am not afraid that you will ever mention this little transaction to General Wraxine! Now, mark me—I shall be back at Rovno in two weeks, when the next contracts are awarded. You can give your administrator there his secret orders to treat with me, as well as the corps commander! Then you can easily learn if my power still holds!"

All that evening, as Xenie Karovitch chatted merrily with her maid, as the Finland train dashed through the gay summer resorts now peopled with the pilgrims of fashion, she wondered how she could hide her own traitorous escapade.

There were two matters now pressing on her mind—the one to hoodwink Madame Barbe Anykoff as to her

secret intimacy with the Director General, and the other to safely conceal her loot, frightened from the head of the great army-furnishing cabal which had once robbed the starving hosts at Plevna, and was now taking its toll of the vast Rovno constructions.

The expedient of sending her maid back from Viborg to be relieved by the intendant, would blind the eyes of that household spy, Barbe Anykoff, and with a three days' run to Stockholm, she could safely lodge the money wrung out of the unwilling Wraxine, as well as the spoil of Necker, in the Swedish agency of the Rothschilds!

"Once turned into Bank of England notes in their hands, I can surely defy the angry Fates!" laughed Xenie.

She had taken a secret alarm at Michel Wraxine's coarse threat of abandoning her once more to debt and poverty.

"In this sale of a soul, I shall have my price!" she murmured; "and Marie shall fight single-handed against her own destiny! She shall elect for herself, and then guard her own heart and head."

Xenie dared not go on further on the dangerous road which led between a Grand Duke's implacable hatred and General Wraxine's baffled fury.

"À la fin—there is always Kalomine," she mused; "but, the court circle will be closed to me. If aught befall, I can now live in comfort out of Russia with this money, and I also have the deposit at the Imperial Bank, and that is protected by the laws of the Empire!" She was on safe ground at last!

It was ten days later when a swan-like pleasure boat swept up to the marble landing of Alexandre Kalomine's Finland villa, and the banker tenderly assisted Madame Karovitch to land.

The little excursion, à l'improviste, to Stockholm, had been only a runaway madness of passionate intrigue, but, the week of dalliance in the whispering gardens of Viborg had made Kalomine a blind tool of the daring woman's secret designs.

And, now, dreading the parting hour, he had vainly begged to be allowed to come in a month to Warsaw,

and meet the velvet-eyed siren there, in a week stolen away from her summer friends.

"Think—think of the danger of our discovery," murmured Xenie, as she carelessly opened her letters, secretly forwarded by the intendant from the Maison Kriloff.

Her brow grew gloomy as she read, and then exclaimed:

"This girl is mad—mad! Do you see now, Alexandre, that this Marie Kriloff is a dangerous charge! Barbe writes me to come back at once! There is trouble!"

And even as she spoke a messenger with telegrams, hastened in from the town.

When Xenie had read the three messages, she sprang to her feet in a sudden alarm.

"I must go back, at once—this very night!" she cried, as she hastened away to pen imperative answers to her unwelcome tidings.

And, yet, when Kalomine parted with the excited woman that evening in Petersburg, he knew nothing of the storm which swept over her troubled soul.

All that her bond slave knew was that but six weeks of dreary heart exile lay before him, for Madame Karovitch only announced her probable return to St. Petersburg on the first week of October.

"You shall have any establishment you choose on your return," he pleaded. "Any surroundings, only come back to me!"

The intendant and Madame's favorite maid watched the beauty's troubled face as she counted every verst made by the clicking wheels.

Xenie Karovitch had destroyed every vestige of the three warning telegrams.

Wraxine's imperative summons, Madame Barbe's frightened appeal, and the first note of defiance from Marie Kriloff were safely hidden.

"If you do not instantly return I shall leave all and come to St. Petersburg," the orphan had telegraphed.

"There has been worse than crime—there has been some gross blundering!" gloomily reflected the angered woman. "Thank God that I am not helpless any

longer under Michel Wraxine's armed heel! I now hold his very future in the hollow of my hand!"

Two days later, the carriage dashed through the rose bowers of the Villa Lubomirski at Rovno, and Xenie Karovitch strode into the deserted drawing-room.

"The Baroness Marie," she hastily demanded, as the maître d'hôtel met her with a frightened face.

"Is ill in her own rooms, and will see no one!" the General's Leporello gravely answered.

"Madame Anykoff?" cried Xenie, in wonder.

"Madame Barbe is driving with General Wraxine," slowly said the dissimulator. "Your Excellency's return was not expected until midnight, and your telegram arrived after the General and Madame Barbe left this morning."

Too proud to be helpless at the mercy of a servant's curiosity, the cunning intrigante calmly sought her own apartments.

"Say nothing of my arrival," the returned pilgrim said, "but, send Madame Anykoff to me, instantly, on her return."

The evening shadows were falling when Barbe Anykoff hastened to her friend's side.

Even in the confusion of the greeting Xenie's quick eye caught a glimpse of the magnificent porte bonheur of matchless diamonds gleaming on the shapely arm of her tacit accomplice.

"You have to tell me—what?" demanded Xenie, with a perfunctory caress.

"Only the unsolved mystery of Marie's strange seclusion!" murmured the cautious widow. "Since the Grand Duke's reception and bal de noblesse she has been invisible to all, and, pour moi, as distant and intractable as a polar bear! J'en suis finie! Take over your household, ma cherie! I leave for St. Petersburg in the morning!"

"And, this is all?" cried Xenie, with difficulty restraining her rage. "I waited before going to Marie to hear your story!"

"I leave it for the Baroness Marie and General Wraxine to enlighten you! I am only a lay figure! Maintenant, je ferai mes malles!"

It was fortunate that Madame Anykoff dined in her own apartment, for the hostess had suddenly disappeared. With the maître d'hôtel as a forerunner, Xenie Karovitch stole away to keep a tryst with General Baron Michel Wraxine at his own secluded personal headquarters. "The General awaits you," the sly go-between had whispered. "He only drove Madame Barbe Anykoff out to veil the anxiety of meeting you."

Once closeted with her stubborn and only half-sincere tyrant lover, Xenie Karovitch was mocked with a second enigmatic answer! "We are both hovering on the brink of ruin," he growled. "I know nothing! I believe the girl is mad! Ask her, or else—take the Grand Duke into your own hands! The mystery lies between them! His Highness is here, and eagerly awaiting your return!"

With eyes blazing with suppressed fires, Xenie Karovitch glided away, leaving the baffled General alone, the prey to a tumultuous passion.

Her one taunt had struck home: "You have broken our compact! I am now absolved from all my promises, and, you will seek me before I seek you!"

And then, regaining her villa, in a chance caught-up droschky, the mistress of Villa Lubomirski quietly entered the boudoir of the beauty whose conduct had become the mystery of the moment! "I can afford to wait! They are all lying to me," mused Xenie, when she had, in amazed astonishment, listened to Marie Kriloff's answer:

"I have nothing to tell you, save that I can not remain here alone! You are here now; all will be well!"

The cool woman of the world gazed upon the orphan's inscrutable face. There was something in it which she had never seen written there before.

"First page in the Book of Life," muttered Xenie, as, with a catlike carelessness, she affected to dismiss the girl's evasive reply from mind.

And then, with a charming philosophy, she supped alone, with a delicate gourmandize, and slept soundly—though these threatening storms obscured the social horizon.

The sunlight of the morning was no brighter than Xenie Karovitch's sunny face as she, with a true Russian duplicity, personally cheered the parting guest. It was Madame Karovitch who waved the last adieu when the train sped away!

Madame Barbe's compartment was a floral bower; there was the intendant in special charge of the parting guest to conduct her back to St. Petersburg, and yet—the two women had exchanged a parting glance of unspoken disdain and mistrust!

But, Barbe Anykoff's cheeks were crimson as she dropped her eyes, for the telltale diamond porte bonheur had been hidden!

Not a word beyond the banalities of the adieu had been exchanged, and the secretly exultant Xenie never even mentioned her guest's departure to the beautiful orphan, whose unruffled face, serene in smiles, met her aunt upon her return.

"There is really something to tell," mused the adroit Xenie, "and it is something that I will never know! But the leaven is working—the pride of life—and so, I will let the play go on undisturbed! It will play itself out now!"

To complete Xenie Karovitch's perfect conviction of the refined deviltry and moral cowardice of the vicious "high life à la mode de Russie," she was not wrongly armed in donning her most exquisite toilet.

For, at two o'clock, the visit of His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Anatole, accompanied by General Baron Michel Wraxine, was a signal to the whole summer city that the uncrowned social queen had returned and taken up her scepter.

In vain did Michel Wraxine try to steal a few moments for a whispered pleading.

With a serene courtesy, Xenie aided her beautiful relative in the polished persiflage of the exchange of that small talk which marks the penury of gilded society.

"The play is on," laughed Xenie, softly, as she waved her salutation to the departing cavaliers. "Marie has found her rôle, and she will play it out with a masterly touch! For, whatever secret brutality has

been committed it is too deep for words! I shall never know the history of the *bal de noblesse*!"

And Madame Xenie, frankly ignoring the past, moved steadily along in her olden way, silently wondering what varying impulses had led to the appeal of the three telegrams.

The days glided on, with every pleasure-laden hour varied in the summer's enjoyments, and still, Marie Kriloff gave no sign of confidence to the woman who was far too fine to catch at any bit of floating gossip.

Only with Michel Wraxine, the tyranny was reversed! The glance which rewarded the General's attempted resumption of the golden part which had bound them left him tongue-tied in silent shame.

And yet, the beautiful mystery at her side never for a moment lowered that shining blade on guard! Too well, in her own guilty bosom, Xenie Karovitch knew that Marie Kriloff's eyes had been opened! That she knew, at last, how fair she was, how madly she was desired; and the worldling knew that whatever wound had rent that silent bosom, it had been seared into insensibility.

The Grand Duke's redoubled courtesies and Michel Wraxine's abject, spaniel-like submission, only proved still further the unspoken wrong.

But, sitting alone in her own haven of refuge, after the day's pleasures were all over, Marie Kriloff's mind recalled the vanished magnificence of the *bal de noblesse*, for which the Grand Duke had appropriated the grand old Château Lubomirski.

It had not seemed strange to her that the *fête* should be given in Xenie's absence. For the Imperial blood may not brook any delay or refusal.

But long after Barbe Anykoff had hidden her disappointments on the Neva, and Xenie ceased her cat-like watch, Marie lived over again every incident of the superb entertainment.

With due hesitation she had declined to attend the ball, limited in toilet still by her period of semi-mourning.

And now she alone knew the full significance of the

personal pleading of the Grand Duke that she would honor the reception.

For he had allured her to view the glories of the ball from the galleries of the third story, overlooking the great second-story banquet halls, now gleaming again with gold and crystal, with tapestry and trophied arms.

General Wraxine's courtly and insistent gallantry had carried the day, and—she had yielded to his veiled hints of what the two beauties of Villa Lubomirski owed to their princely host of the magnificent revel!

And the soft persuasion of Barbe Anykoff now was recalled, with a loathing of the outraged spirit.

It had been impossible for Marie Kriloff to disobey an invitation which was almost a command.

The Marechal de Noblesse of Volhynia had named as guests the ladies from the sacred cercle de noblesse, who, gathered in a ring of beauty around the Grand Duke, received the convives of the superb fête champêtre, with its concert, its military games, and its desperately ridden officers' races.

There had been a grand banquet in the triple avenue of tents before the château, and the old castle was once more ablaze with golden light!

The White Eagle looked down again on graceful forms, and manly chivalry. The glitter of stars, the gleam of diamonds; the brighter sheen of happy eyes; the soft murmurs of passion's pleading, brought back to the old halls the glories of the old days, when Napoleon, with Duroc, Caulaincourt, and Bessières, had watched the witching polonaise and the mad mazurka in these very same love-haunted rooms.

Marie Kriloff had yielded to the protection of Madame la Génèrale Paskiewitch, and given up the resplendent Barbe Anykoff to the knightly guidance of Michel Wraxine.

"It is the high midsummer," murmured the corps commander. "Half of the troops go out on the maneuvers, and the Grand Duke's only sorrow is, that he could not defer this festival for Baroness Xenie's return, and that, in the dance, we miss the fairest face, the lightest foot, the Queen of Pearls!"

And, as the sun went down over the warm fields,

still rich in their ungathered harvests, the odor of rose and mignonette swept down the river from the leafy groves, now dear to countless lovers!

The voice of mighty Pan stirred the whispering reeds by the crystal stream, and the sunset gold lit up the yellow flag with its double-headed eagles.

Marie knew now the story of the old château, the romance of My Lady's Walk, and all the grim legends of the dungeons of the doubled basement casemates.

The chivalric old Count Lazienski had taken the beautiful orphan under the protection of his silvered age, the contemporary of the Potockis, the Brannickis, and the Radzivils—told her the story of the past glories of the house of Lubomirski.

The younger cavaliers of the haughty noblesse envied the veteran of Poland's last struggle, as, with the peerless beauty on his arm, he showed her the hallowed spot where Bonaparte received a score of kings on the lawn, in 1807!

The towering Mars on the north pedestal had lost his useless sword, and his sightless eyes were vainly turned to the armless Venus, a poor, frozen exile from Carrara.

Only Valdor Lazienski could decipher the twelve superbly chiseled coats of arms on the façade of the two wings!

Standing under the peristyle of six superb monoliths, he painted the glories of the old days when the Lubomirskis ruled Volhynia.

The two great wings, the huge central façade, the great galleries above, were echoing with the merry laughter of the mercurial Muscovites on this happy day.

Long after the splendid banquet, when the Grand Duke had broken up his court under the regal oaks, the lonely orphan had stolen away to a nook on the highest gallery of the vaulted main hall.

It was inexpressibly beautiful, the swaying dance below her there, with its “woven paces and its waving arms!”

There was the “minuet de la cour,” with all the dancers in stately Louis Quatorze costumes; the polo-

naise, with the old family regalia, ransacked from a score of Volhynian palaces; the mazurka, where the quartets all represented historical Russian court characters!

And the silver moon swung overhead, passing on till Marie Kriloff sat hidden in rich, dusky shadows!

While she dreamed there alone of her yet unfolded future, she suddenly heard a passionate voice whispering: "The Queen of Roses shall yet be crowned! For, I will wear you on my heart!"

With a terrified gasp, the orphan tore off the insulter's encircling arms, and sternly faced the tall soldier, magnificent in an antique Boyar dress.

The gleam of her eyes told the princely lover of the wrath of an outraged soul! With one mad spring, Marie Kriloff reached the open casement!

It was a sheer hundred feet below to the fanged stone pavement of the rear esplanade!

"Stir a single inch, and I will hurl myself down! I swear it, by my mother's grave!" she threatened.

And then, the affrighted Grand Duke knelt before her.

"Pardon my madness! I was borne beyond myself! I swear that I will leave you! I will atone! You are safe! You shall shine yet, a jewel of the Winter Palace, beloved, respected, adored!"

But the trembling beauty stood there with her foot still resting on the window-ledge, and the dizzy depth yawning below her! Her face was ashen pale!

"You said you owed me a boon! Your Highness," she slowly faltered, in a choking voice, "my brother died for your flag! Swear to me that you will leave me! That you will forget this night—blot this cowardly scene from your heart! I have only the memory of my dead brother as the talisman to guard my helplessness! If you are a soldier, GO!"

When Marie Kriloff sped down the deserted gallery leading to the east, she knew that the princely offender had taken flight by the western stairway!

Gliding into the waiting-room, she seized the first scarf and then veiled her stately beauty.

Stealing out upon the lawn, in rear of the château,

she saw the park was thickly crowded with carriages!

And the first coachman leaped to his seat at her stern command.

Safely back in the Villa Lubomirski, Marie had sent the maître d'hôtel down to warn Madame Anykoff of the sudden indisposition of her neglected charge.

And now, conscience stricken, Barbe Anykoff had feared to answer General Wraxine's brusque demands for the vanished beauty!

He feared to question the Grand Duke, whose clouded brow mocked the midnight merriment of the reckless ball.

Safe in her villa home—with a shudder—Marie recalled that only Madame Anykoff had known of her chosen hiding-place—a favorite nook in the old château, open to the noblesse at all times!

“She would have given me over to shame!” the indignant orphan sobbed, as she closed her doors to all.

Beyond her sternly worded telegram to Xenie, the young Queen of Roses had made no sign! And so Prince, and General, and faithless woman friend all watched each other—in a stealthy dissimulation—till the return of Madame Karovitch had enabled Barbe Anykoff to escape from the danger of a violent scandale. Fortunately, the keen-eyed gossips had seen nothing!

And now, as the golden September days glided away, and the northern winds began to drift the flaming autumn leaves, deep piled in the Volhynian dells, the summer roses fell, leaf by leaf, and the gay devotees of fashion stole away to Moscow and Warsaw—to gay St. Petersburg—and the mad whirl of pleasure ebbed away from fair Rovno!

The fields were all shorn at last, the gray battalions were hutt'd for the winter, and General Wraxine, with a feverish zeal, urged on the great constructions to shelter his men before the winter snows should drive the toiling moujiks to cover.

Marie Kriloff had found a truly congenial mate in the spirited little Countess Pauline Lazienski, the last of a noble Polish line. There was no diminution of Xenie Karovitch's watchful tenderness, no cessation of

General Wraxine's courtly attentions, and the Grand Duke Anatole, with unflagging zeal, now brought the Baroness Xenie forward as the directing spirit of the season's closing fêtes. It was his only safeguard to avoid a widespread scandal!

But, between Wraxine and the cunning woman whom he had failed to master, a smoldering resentment burned, for the guilty partners in intrigue felt the sands shifting beneath their feet.

The explosion came at last, when Marie had stolen away to the Château Lazienski for a three days' farewell sojourn with the dainty little Countess Pauline.

In the private cabinet of the Corps Commander's guarded quartier-general, two warring natures strove bitterly for the mastery.

Xenie Karovitch, watchful and unyielding, listened to the storm of useless rage which made Michel Wraxine a black-browed demon.

She had been summoned hastily by the smug confidant of the mighty General.

"Beware, Madame," whispered the maître d'hôtel, "the black hour is upon him!"

The dauntless adventuress toyed with a perfumed cigarette as she listened to the fatal intelligence of the sudden withdrawal of the Grand Duke's favor.

"The whole vast constructions of the Second Division—the projects for the Third Division—are all temporarily countermanded. I am ordered to return all the contractors' schedules and vouchers, and even now my successor may be named! You have failed me!"

Xenie laughed bitterly. "You know the secret story of your bungling in my absence! You ruined all, and, if you did not, then Barbe Anykoff has played the traitress, or else—the Grand Duke has shown himself a human wolf! I told you to beware! And—you have all deceived me!"

"Listen," growled the enraged soldier. "One week from to-day is the first of October; the villa must be then surrendered! You can either save me, by your active help, or else go back to starve on the Place Michel with My Lady Disdain! You have not a rouble left between you! I will send you back decently, so

as to avoid a scandal, but that ends all! Either save me or else shift for yourself!"

"What must I do?" demanded Xenie, her heart filled with a secret scorn of the threatening brute.

"Throw yourself in the Grand Duke's path! Tell him that you fear to trust Marie Kriloff, a dowerless girl, to the chance of a future of poverty, and that our coming marriage depends upon the confirmation of my command. He will then be bound to you! Ask him for the confirmation of my corps rank as the wedding present!"

The swarthy soldier dropped his eyes for very shame.

The bribe of a human soul was to be offered in this unholy compact.

But, Xenie Karovitch's face hardened. "You have jeered at my poverty," she sharply said. You have even threatened me! True, I have had my poor, paltry wage in this gadfly summer glory! But you must give me a free hand and pay me well! As for Marie Kriloff—look to yourself! If you do not marry her out of hand, you will lose her! And only her orphan's pride will bring her to your arms! As for fear—she knows it not! She is a stronger soul than either of us! And —she must be deceived—deceived by me alone! She has taken the alarm! I can guess at the Grand Duke's brutal rashness! But she has loyally kept her secret! Beware of her, though!"

"I care not!" growled Wraxine. "Once that she is my wife, he is then in our power! He dare not abandon me, and my name and rank will cover all!"

For hours, the human panthers wrangled over their innocent prey, until Xenie Karovitch had brought the desperate schemer to his knees.

"I will be your secret slave," he pledged at parting, "and Necker shall give a wedding douceur of a quarter of a million roubles to you! If the Grand Duke sanctions the marriage, you know all that it means!"

A week later, Marie Kriloff faced the Baroness Karovitch in a paroxysm of tears. The well-laid plans of the faithless guardian had brought the orphan to a bedside of simulated illness.

Frozen into stone, the helpless orphan listened to

the story of sudden ruin—the failure of her relative's agents—and the penury staring them in the face. And now the time of leaving Rovno was upon them!

"This summer luxury—was it not of your providing?" demanded Marie, her voice sounding hollow and hopeless.

And then, with tears and sobs of simulated confession, Xenie Karovitch murmured the lying story of General Wraxine's noble generosity.

The scales had fallen from the young beauty's eyes! She knew now of her aunt's supposed sacrifices to maintain her niece's position during the season of mourning. The winter was before them, and the tale of the sudden sweeping away of the whole Karovitch fortune by the dishonesty of a fugitive steward and a failing banker, summed up the ruin before the two lonely women.

The midnight hour was upon them before Xenie confessed the unpaid debt to General Wraxine for the summer splendors of the Villa Lubomirski.

"And so, I have really broken his bread all this season," murmured the helpless beauty. "It is a debt of honor, and must be paid!"

With an unerring sagacity, Xenie Karovitch had fathomed the girl's high-souled nature. The long hours dragging by only weighed her down more deeply with the sense of the sacrifices which had been made for her.

It was most artfully done, the frankly spoken words of the General, when he also broke in upon Marie Kriloff's mental torture.

Pale and silent, the lonely hearted woman listened to the blunt soldier's offer of his name and home.

Xenie Karovitch had, with a delicate art, refrained from one single word of counsel.

The daughter of Helène Souivaroff gazed sadly in the eyes of her stern suitor.

"I will ask but one favor," the pallid beauty murmured—"that there be no display—and—that I may be allowed to avoid the clamor of society until after Easter."

When General Wraxine rode away at the head of his

glittering staff he carried a traitor's heart in his bosom.
The bait was taken!

In the half hour of their meeting, the haunting eyes of the beautiful orphan had told him of the surrender of her hand to pay the sacred obligation of his veiled hospitality.

And even Xenie Karovitch feared now to break in upon the icy reserve of the young patrician's self-sacrifice.

"I shall go to Pauline Lazienski, at Warsaw, for a week!" gravely said the Baroness Marie. "General Wraxine will bring his personal representatives there. He will escort you, and then—the marriage can take place at once. He will choose all the ladies to accompany you!"

That night, standing alone on the veranda, Marie Kriloff gazed down into the valley where the moonlight shivered its lances upon the roofs of the old château.

"Blood pays all debts," she murmured. "I will at least have a name, a protector—and—my life shall flow on like the river shaded by the forests, darkened in quiet peace, serene and unbroken by storms!"

There was not even a whisper of the coming marriage of the haughty General, when Marie Kriloff, under the escort of Count Lazienski, left the valley of Rovno, where the fallen rose leaves were now drifted on the deserted paths.

But, Xenie Karovitch alone knew of the Grand Duke's sanction which sealed the fortunes of General Baron Michel Wraxine. And the sale of a soul went on in all its hideous cruelty.

When, two weeks later, the pale beauty stood as a bride before the altar of the oldest Russian church in Warsaw she never gazed right or left as the music echoed in the vaulted domes.

Her beautiful eyes were downcast! Her stately loveliness shone out in her simple wedding robes as she stood there, a sacrifice to her own silent code of honor!

Her martial husband's voice sounded far off in her ears as she turned away to leave the gorgeous shrine.

With a wondering glance, she gazed upon the tall

officer in a superb Cuirassier uniform, who had held the golden crown over her graceful head.

It was only when he rose to propose her health at the wedding feast at the Château Lazienski that the pale bride met the glances of his earnest eyes!

And General Wraxine answered, pledging the graceful speaker, "To the representative of His Highness the Grand Duke Anatole—Captain Prince Paul Zastrow—my first aid-de-camp."

And, pretty Pauline Lazienski sighed as she gazed at the new addition to the staff! For the young prince was as graceful as the peerless Michael who slew the fabled dragon!

BOOK II.

IN THE PANTHER'S CLAWS.

CHAPTER VI.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

It was on the evening after that sudden marriage, which had startled all the gossips of General Wraxine's army corps to a timorous dumbness, that Xenie Karovitch sat alone in a grand boudoir salon of the Hotel de l'Europe at Warsaw.

The cold blasts whistled over the Place de l'Université, where the flower of the young Polish nobility had perished in the last brutal massacre.

The October skies were dreary in their deep-vaulted, icy green. But a bright birch fire sparkled in the room. There was a cozy dinner for two spread, and Baroness Xenie was in a ravishing demi toilette. She awaited that chivalric Valdor Lazienski.

"He can read this riddle," mused Xenie, who had feared to brave the pale, silent bride, a daughter of the snows, in her white silk and gleaming blue-white pearls.

General Baron Michel Wraxine had returned to his trebly important command without a single word to indicate his wishes to his reckless feminine ally.

Whatever had prompted Marie Kriloff to an instant self-immolation, the crafty Xenie now felt that the avenues to the Rovno paradise were now closed forever.

From the very instant of the nuptial benediction, the silent bride had quietly assumed all the queenly rights of wifehood. If there was any public response called for by General Wraxine's lofty courtesy, the serene

dignity of the young wife was equal to the varying occasion.

Xenie, sin-stained and soiled, was powerless to read the light shining out on the placid brows of the high-souled orphan.

But from Marie's first spoken word after she was consecrated the Baroness Wraxine, Xenie knew that her guiding influence was lost forever.

"I will send your maid and the intendant to my home on the Place Michel, with all your luggage and belongings," gravely said Marie.

"The General has already telegraphed to Elia and Marie that the house is yours as long as you wish to use it!"

"Will you not set up your own establishment?" artfully asked the wondering Xenie.

"I shall complete my full period of retirement before opening our official home," said Marie. "The General will keep the villa as a home for me, and will still retain his own personal apartments at the Cercle de Noblesse. Thus I can be left alone, and so, I am no longer a helpless charge upon your hands! I have requested the General to arrange with you for all the generous expenditures made for me since I was left penniless!"

In sheer poverty of language, Xenie murmured: "And, to Barbe Anykoff what greeting?"

"None whatever!" coldly said Marie. "Madame Anykoff perfectly understands my sentiments! I owe her nothing!"

"Then I will go on from here direct," murmured Xenie. "You can send the servants and my luggage direct by Wilna! Where will you spend the winter?"

"Probably in Odessa," Marie calmly answered. "I have no desire to ever see St. Petersburg again."

"And, the Court? You must be presented on your new rank!" was the worldling's last tentative remark.

"Wherever the flag of Russia flies over an army corps," simply replied Marie, "is the home of its commander."

Xenie Karovitch's face was now a burning crimson. A sudden fear smote her agitated heart! Had the silent orphan discovered the robbery of the moneys

secretly recovered by the prudent Kalomine? Had Wraxine betrayed her and warned Marie?

"No!" she quickly resolved. "Kalomine is true! I must reach him at once! I need his counsels! But this Wraxine—he is brutal and capable of anything! Dare he betray me? No! There is Siberian disgrace—the chains of the convict before him! This high-spirited young neophyte has simply hurled herself in his arms to escape the gnawing shame of dependence! And he will soon tame her heart of fire; he will break her to work his will!"

It was with a haggard anxiety, however, that she parted with the strange bridal pair.

Michel Wraxine's face was sternly inscrutable; Marie's set in a lofty self-control!

"*Elle est plus forte que moi,*" sighed Xenie. "And she may rule him with a rod of iron! There was something mysterious in the expression of the young wife's face; the cold composure of her masterful manner! She is of the true, imperious Souvaroff blood!" murmured Xenie. "*À la fin, plus royal que les rois.*"

It had been a parting in apparent peace, and yet with neither affection nor regret, and for once in her life, Xenie Karovitch feared to steal a sly glance at one of her slaves.

"*Après tout, I pity Michel Wraxine! I wish him joy of this human iceberg!*" muttered Xenie, as she plumed herself to meet Valdor Lazienski.

The St. Petersburg beauty proposed to glean from the courtly old Polish Count such confidences as had been imparted to the witching Pauline, or to the aged noble.

The dinner was charming, and yet for all her pre-hensile softness, the deceitful Xenie had thrown away her Yquem and Burgundy.

The suave old Polish noble was gallant, quand même, but he simply bowed when he said at parting:

"I am sorry that I can not aid you in determining the reasons of Baroness Marie's sudden decision. Wraxine's military position is superb; he has enormous estates, even if encumbered—his rank is of the highest; he is but little rising fifty, and the way of life

is made smooth for that superb woman! You told me that she was penniless! Is that not the reason for this tragedy of life! It is not the sale of a soul—it is only the martyrdom of a proud heart! God grant that she does not learn that there are other sorrows in this weary world besides penury! We Polish nobles, Madame," he gravely concluded, "have walked in shadows since the entombment of our beloved land! All is death and desolation around us!"

The acute-minded intrigant saw how futile it was to break into the whispered confidences of Pauline and Marie.

"This bright, brave falcon has soared above me and beyond me!" sighed the fascinating widow. "And so Michel's home is to be a *terra incognita* to me? We will see! We will see! There is always the Necker tyranny—he fears that—and he shall fear me through that, and he shall work my will! And this new Prince Charming! Who is he? What does he here as a first aid-de-camp?"

All that Xenie could extract was a shadowy halo of the romantic history of young Paul Zastrow! A Captain of the Circassian personal bodyguard of the Czar, he had been honorably exiled from Peterhoff and Tsarskœ to the field for a desperate love affair, in which a grand duchess had stooped to conquer! And this Zastrow's desperate mission to the Pamirs, his forlorn hope visit to Thibet, his swimming the icy Volga, his duels, his winning the last officers' gold cup, his chivalric Circassian adventures, all these proclaimed the true paladin.

That graceful, boyish-looking youth was the same, whether leading a forlorn hope or the mazurka in the white ballroom of the Winter Palace, with the placidly mysterious winning smile!

Xenie had frowned darkly when General Wraxine told her that Prince Zastrow would have charge of his personal headquarters.

"Point de petites visites!" she mused. "He either represents the Grand Duke Anatole, or else—the Neckers! In the one case, he is my enemy; in the other, perhaps, fated to be my spy and tool!"

The high character of the widowed Princess Prascovie Zastrow was but too well known to Baroness Xenie.

Still handsome in the late forties, a majestic beauty; a woman of head and heart and unbounded talents, she adored her only son—the last of the line—the one child who had ever brightened her dreary life!

For the old Prince Feodor Zastrow, a weird relic of Boyar days, was dead these many years, and though sought for with a silent dignity, Princess Prascovie had strangely resisted a second marriage. She adored her young hero!

"Perhaps the gossips were right," mused Xenie, as she "unclasped the wedded eagles of her gown"; "the boy may be sent here in brilliant position to marry Arline Potocki, the sole heiress of the enormous state and wealth of the Potockis, the last of the magnificent Polish nobles, who have retained their wealth, save the crafty Radzivils! Otherwise he will be a slave to Wraxine's hideous temper and stern martinet ways, and, he is lost in Rovno as head orderly to a corps commander! Without some prejudged purpose—que diable allait il faire, dans cette galère?"

As she sighed herself into the dreams, haunted by her one signal defeat, Xenie thirsted to be safely at St. Petersburg, and so gain all the local news by going afar off!

"Prince Charming! Prince Charming!" she smiled, as in the bright morning sunlight she took the direct train for the Neva. "Beware of troubling the quiet seas of this new matrimonial bliss! For, they are 'mare clausem!'"

Xenie dimly recognized some hidden compact between the eager General and the stately young bride!

"She is to rule the Villa Lubomirski, and he the personal headquarters at the guarded Cercle de Noblesse! The Grand Duke! No! My God—that would be too horrible!"

Having telegraphed, in cipher, her coming arrival to Alexandre Kalomine, Baroness Xenie decided not to trouble further the strangely assorted lovers!

All that she knew was that her niece had instantly

resented her own taunt of dependence by throwing herself blindly into Michel Wraxine's arms! Xenie was far too good a diplomat to spy at second hand!

"I will stand mute," she resolved; "only, there is Barbe Anykoff! A woman scorned and flouted, turned out, *vi et armis*, of this newly gilded lover's paradise! She will gladly work my revenge! Barbe shall follow them on to Odessa, and she has her own alliance tendre left behind her at Rovno. I can operate smoothly and safely through her!"

Before Xenie Karovitch had frankly met the heart-happy Alexandre Kalomine in Barbe Anykoff's parlors two days later, she had taken up a permanent *pièd à terre* in the Maison Kriloff.

"Here I can fight from the enemy's citadel," she mused, for she had vowed, now, with a keen malignity, the final disgrace and degradation of Marie Wraxine.

"He is proud; his name is unsullied! But I can hold my own, for both the Grand Duke Anatole and Wraxine fear me, and these fetters of gold may be broken. Prince Charming is there, and Barbe Anykoff, too, has a debt to pay! Down from her pedestal the haughty Marie shall come! I must only find the way! And, first, to let Wraxine repay me for all my 'kindness,'" the velvet-eyed witch laughed. "I shall make a good figure this winter at court. I have a sure friend in the Grand Duke, *et à la fin?* Kalomine shall marry me if I choose, but the game shall be played out—*jusqu'à la dernière scène!*"

A month only after the sudden marriage which had astonished all the military aristocracy of the Rovno corps, not a noble officer, not a single patrician woman but had gathered an uneasy appreciation of the calm *hauteur* of the wife of the Commanding General!

The snows were now sparsely whitening the shorn plains, and the long, gray battalions wound over the emerald fields no more.

The crack of the hunter's rifle resounded in the lonely forest, and the brilliant riding parties had all vanished from the deserted alleys.

True, there was still wild cheer in the officers' clubs and the military casinos.

The Cercle de Noblesse now held continual revel under the dimmed white eagles of the old castle of the Lubomirskis, and every noble household within a hundred miles at this time sheltered its house party of jocund officers and bright-eyed, bold-hearted Russian beauties.

"The accursed thirst of gold" burned in every heart, for, in this restricted season the gaming tables and "plunging" on the officers' races opened their short avenues either to golden fortune or black ruin.

The soldiers were all left to their winter employments—finishing the interiors of the great, yellow-brick barracks, or else, under their sergeants and corporals, were fabricating their kits for the next spring's maneuvers.

Scores of the more fortunate officers were now scattered "en congè," from Odessa to St. Petersburg, and from Nijni to Warsaw.

The few military duties were the guard mounts, and the ceaseless tramping of the weary sentinels, their bayonets gleaming a frozen blue in the thin, frosty air.

Only at the corps headquarters was a continual, never-ending convocation of the higher officers, eagerly working out the details of the barracks, works, railways, and fortifications to be created by the Second and Third Division, and the huge artillery park, the cavalry camps, and engineer trains.

The central figure of all this activity was General Baron Michel Wraxine, a fiery and energetic taskmaster. Whether sweeping along fifty versts a day, at the head of a magnificent staff, escorting the Grand Duke in the inspection of the engineers' work, or personally urging on the toiling hundreds of mechanics and thousands of dull-eyed, listless soldiers. Wraxine was "a frame of adamant—a soul of fire."

The great cantonment, the forty thousand hardy soldiery, the twenty thousand attendants, were all firmly held in his iron grasp, and yet the master of all, save his Imperial Inspector, the Corps Commander found the sealed heart of his silent bride to be a Gibraltar.

For some indefinable higher human ether hung

around the Villa Lubomirski, where Marie Wraxine gently ruled with her silent, speaking eyes.

She was the one human enigma of the great military city. Even the moujik on the road, the strolling pilgrim, knew her superb carriage with its clattering half dozen of lancers.

There was the delicate, impassioned beauty of Pauline Lazienski, a graceful shadow ever at her side.

On the one magnificent afternoon reception of the home-coming of the strangely assorted couple, the entire official society of the corps had been bidden.

For five long hours the tide of chivalric officers and bright-eyed women swept past the princely ring where General Wraxine and his peerless bride received the obeisance of the whole military family.

A brave, haughty figure was Wraxine; his uniform gleaming with jeweled stars and orders; his diamond-studded sword glittering like Excalibur of old. And as the curved line of grizzled Colonels and proud Generals led up to the chief on the right, so, on the left, the gleaming jewel-decked rank of the wives of the superior commanders was a sinuous line of beauty, softly guiding on to where Marie Wraxine stood, with a veiled pride shining in her clear, bright eyes!

While witching music breathed, the lynx-eyed higher staff moved on the guests with a quick suggestion, through the arched doors, where a royal banquet was spread, and scores of gorgeous lacqueys, with their noiseless tread, anticipated every wish.

It was a royal pageant, and yet, in the little supporting bevy of grandes dames, where the Princess Prascovie Zastrow, the lovely Arline Potocki, and sweet Pauline Lazienski stood, with the wives of the Division Generals, not one of the passing hundreds had seen a smile upon the carved lips of the Queen of Pearls!

Only one among the waiting cavaliers had seen a sign of life on that pallid countenance.

The grave, sweet dignity of Marie Wraxine's face only varied for an instant, when His Highness, the Grand Duke Anatole, followed by his superb suite, humbly bowed before the lady of Villa Lubomirski!

There was a flickering red tinge, and a trembling of the lip, lost upon all, save that dark-eyed Antinous, Prince Paul Zastrow.

He alone saw the delicate hands quiver, as with a mighty effort she restrained herself when the Grand Duke, taking off his own highest order, pinned the glittering star on General Wraxine's left breast.

It was a princely recognition of the Corps Commander's imperial favor.

Lost upon others, the sudden thrill of feeling was perceived by Paul Zastrow, and for a moment, his eyes rested upon Marie standing there in all her peerless beauty.

"She is like the angels!" was the sudden verdict of Zastrow's wildly beating heart; and then, all his pleading soul shone in his eyes, as Marie, for the first time, fully drank in the mournful, elegant fascination of Zastrow's remarkable glances.

And now, she knew what manner of man had held the golden crown over her head, when she gave her liberty, her whole being, up in one mad, rash payment of the debt of helpless dependence.

In the quiet month which had passed since the lune de miel, Paul Zastrow had never heard the flute-like voice, for his days were passed in dancing attendance upon the stern Corps Commander.

And so, the marriage had now been blazoned forth in stately social guise.

There had been also a superb masquerade ball at the vast Château, a pageant specially ordered by His Highness, the Grand Duke.

Though Madame la Generale Wraxine had walked through the vast hall clad in her wedding robes, unmasked and leaning on her husband's arm, she had only bowed in reverence to the Czar's representative, and then passed on out into the splendid isolation of the villa.

"Plus que reine," murmured la Princesse Prascovie Zastrow. "She is more than queen of all; she shines them down!"

Paul Zastrow, in his romantic cavalier dress of Charles I, tried to forget the silent eyes of the Queen of

Pearls, in the witching fascinations of Arline Potocki and the thrilling Pauline Lazienski, but, late that night, he dreamed of those love-haunted, unawakened eyes.

The foaming wine had been drained a thousand times to the "Queen of the Corps," and though Madame Wraxine had ceremoniously visited—*en caractère*—all the first ladies of the vast host, she remained a walking mystery to all.

At Wraxine's dinner of state, only the Princess Prascovie Zastrow, the Polish patricians, the old Count Lazienski, and the steady-eyed Grand Duke toasted the Czar!

To all else, the stately bride, serenely moving on in every splendid function as a queen regnant, was a stranger queen, and seen only as in a glass—darkly.

The high ceremonial courtesy of General Wraxine, never faltering, showed to his vast following the pride which filled a husband's heart.

And now, only the hot-hearted Xenie Karovitch, lingering on the Place Michel, driven on from one tempestuous pleasure to another, waited for the coming time when sorrow should avenge her!

It was with an unspeakable humiliation that she had received Michel Wraxine's princely repayment of her fictitious liberality!

Shuddering at heart at her own vile meanness, she silently accepted the crisp hundred thousand roubles!

"It is the price of the past—the bribe of silence—the seal of banishment for the future! And, Marie still silent! It is her hand which has closed the door! Great God! There is always the Grand Duke! And he shall work my revenge! And Wraxine shall be forced to speak plainly! She shall know her hero as he is. There will be time at Odessa, and Barbe shall share the pleasure of filling the bitter cup!"

Already mastering the secret alliances of the coming year's vast operations, Xenie, at once Necker's tyrant and ally, now Kalomine's guiding star, knew of the coming winter court of the Grand Duke at Odessa, and the enforced presence of the Corps Commander and his peerless bride.

"It is an open tournament of life, there," she laughed. "I can not be excluded by my lady's fancies, and a flattering word on the Black Sea, another on the Neva, will soon make the Grand Duke my unconscious instrument!"

"Tu me lo pagherai," grimly swore Xenie, as, with pallid lips, she listened to all the stories of the conquering Star of Beauty, far above her, there in the zenith, where Rovno's blossomed roses had faded and died forever for her erring feet!

The borean blasts swept down the fleecy mantle of winter's snows once more upon the city of St. Petersburg, and the blue ice locked the grim jaws of the Neva again in its crystal grip!

There was feasting and pomp in the Winter Palace; the wild devil's auction of the capital was on once more! And, when the golden Christmas days were fled, Xenie Karovitch, en princesse, prepared for her flitting to the shores of the Euxine.

With all a woman's love of torturing mystery, she had boldly accosted the Grand Duke Anatole at a palace masque, on one of his brief visits to the most dangerous court in the world.

The tall Romanoff was anxious to hasten back to the foamy blue waves of Odessa's sapphire bay.

He turned impatiently away from the voluptuous "Venetian Lady," whose eyes gleamed with an insidious invitation through her black velvet mask! Her eyes were passion-lit!

But, other eyes, shining in serene splendor, were now calling him afar off to Odessa's cliffs.

The entourage of the white marble ballroom of the Winter Palace was a dangerous one for a member of the Imperial family, always under the eyes of a hundred spies. And so, while the superb orchestra wailed out a throbbing waltz, the Grand Duke Anatole sought some gentlemanly means of eluding the persistent mask who had pursued him.

"Only an *affaire d'interêt*," he mused, for he well knew that every woman in the great pillared ballroom had been examined "*sans masque*," by the chamber-

lains and the officials of the Haut Police, secretly posted.

He was bowing a final peremptory congè when the "Venetian Lady" whispered a few words in his ear which brought the hot blood surging to his passionate heart.

"Tell me, who are you?" he imperiously demanded!

"One who can give you your heart's desire! The only woman on earth who can aid you!"

The tall noble grasped her arm, huskily whispering: "You shall not leave me till you have explained this! I must see your face!"

"Only in your own rooms, Altesse," she whispered, as he leaned over till the perfumed wreath of her silken hair swept his brow.

"Lift your mask—a trifle," the Grand Duke implored.

"Every woman has her price," murmured the "Venetian Lady." "My price is your protection—nothing more—for, fear alone could hold my hand back from loosening the only barrier which annoys you now. Wraxine's vengeance! I can disarm him!"

With a graceful sweep of her rounded left arm, Xenie, turning her head, loosened the mask for an instant.

"Follow me!" hoarsely whispered the Grand Duke.

"And am I under your princely honor, as a guard?" the vicious woman muttered, her eyes gleaming fiercely through the loosened mask, now being daintily readjusted.

"I grant all you ask in advance, parole d'honneur, foi de gentilhomme!" gravely muttered the disguised Grand Duke.

He was in the somber uniform of the Black Brunswick, and looked a magnificent Death in Life.

He whispered a single word of direction, and then disappeared in the splendid crowd!

With stately leisure, Xenie drifted through the great corridor, now thronged with the motley characters of every age and clime.

Far across the frozen river the lights of the great

fortress twinkled, and below, on the masonry scarped driveway, the sleighs were madly dashing along.

"*Foi de gentilhomme—I am under the shield of his honor!*" she moodily muttered, as she gazed around her. "*The old, old story!*" she dreamily said. "*Desire, Love, Delight, Despair!* The same old story of Life and Love, of Woman's lures, of Man's cold inhumanity! The dark hours following the bright ones, from day to day, and, still the world runs on! And now that this cold-hearted brute, Wraxine, openly spurns the woman who made him, I will throw myself, en Napoléon, on the side of the strongest battalions!"

With a careless glance, she turned at the foot of the vast corridor, and followed a gentleman in waiting, who whispered one keyword, "*Victory!*" as she stole away.

Swiftly striding across a threshold, she disappeared in one of the Imperial suites of the east side, overlooking the vast Place du Palais.

The guardian respectfully bowed and withdrew. The superb parlor was left vacant. She had heard the door click behind the retreating confidential servant.

"Trapped!" she gasped.

And then, she laughed merrily and tossed aside her mask, as one of the pictures on the wall deftly turned on a concealed vertical axis, and the Grand Duke Anatole stepped down from the frame! His blond beauty shone out on the somber dress in golden hues of youth.

"*Point de compliments, ma belle amie!*" he brusquely said, as he stepped into the next room, closing the door! "*There will be a 'petit souper à deux'* served in a few moments," cried the princely Anatole, as he returned, and then calmly seated himself at Xenie Karovitch's side.

"You are now bound, en bonne camarade, to tell me all! And, first, what can I do for you? You must name it—à l'instant—for, I shall be three months at Odessa, inspecting the cavalry mounts of the Eighth Corps.

"And, General Baron Wraxine will be stationed there till April 1, also inspecting, but only for the

Rovno Corps! In the meantime, General Dragono-vitch will command at Rovno, the winter camp?" quietly added Xenie. The Grand Duke started and dropped the cigarette that he was rolling. "Pretty Devil, how do you find out these State secrets?" he asked, as he presented her the golden case.

"I am inside the lines, Altesse," laughed Xenie. Anatole strode up and down the room in silence.

"I leave to-morrow," he said. "All must be settled between us to-night!"

"It is easily done," resolutely answered Xenie, her eyes fastened gloatingly upon him. "I will come at once to Odessa, with Barbe Anykoff as my camarade d'hivèr. To carry my point, you must make me persona grata everywhere there! And, above all, your Imperial Highness must obtain for me the rentrée to this peculiar Wraxine household! The husband already fears you. This once done, then—leave all else to me, remembering "faint heart never won fair lady!"

"Ah, yes! Toujours de l'audace!" murmured the Grand Duke.

"And yet, one can go too far. In the first instance you were coolly brutal to thrust yourself as quickly upon her as if she were a French gouvernante, waiting there, à l'improviste, for you in that old window!" the mocking woman cried.

"She told you——"

"Nothing!" viciously replied Xenie. "But I know all! Wraxine would now abandon me, for he needs me no more; and the Snow Queen has already ignored me! At your side, they can not repulse me!"

"Tell me frankly what I shall do?" cried Anatole, as, at the tinkle of a golden bell, he led the intrigante into the next room, where unseen hands had already arranged a dainty supper.

"Nay, keep the box—as a token!" said the Grand Duke, waving a hand gleaming with superb turquoises and diamond sparklets.

Xenie laughed as she gazed at the golden case with the A. A. incrusted in superb diamonds, the jeweled rim of exquisite pigeon-blood rubies, lending a crimson gleam to her slender white hands.

"Thanks, Monseigneur," she laughed, as he knelt and kissed her hand.

"You will find Madame la Générale Barbe Anykoff and I, in a week, at the Hotel St. Petersbourg, in Odessa, voyageant en princesse. And you are to give a magnificent dinner for us at your own Quartier-Général. Only the Governor-General and wife, the Commander of the Eighth Corps and his wife, the Vorontsoffs, the Wraxines, and Barbe and myself! You are to make me the special guest of honor!"

The Grand Duke was watching her warily.

"If the Princesse Prascovie Zastrow is there, then, herself and young Prince Paul!"

"Et après?" moodily demanded the Grand Duke. Xenie laughed merrily.

"On your insistence in further courtesies to me, the opera (only Barbe and I), with a few carriage tours on the Boulevard. I will be surely invited to visit the Wraxines, en famille, to avoid scandal. Barbe Anykoff will remain cozily at the Hotel St. Petersbourg."

"And then?" growled the Duke.

"A week after I am in the house, you will order General Wraxine away into the country, and be sure to send Paul Zastrow with him," she smilingly said. "Keep Wraxine all winter moving from Kharkov to Kief, from Orenburg to Cracow."

"And now, to finish?" hastily cried the Grand Duke, an eager light gleaming in his wicked eyes.

"You are to visit me as often as you please at the Wraxines, en bon diable, when you will, how, and as you will."

The excited young man moodily said: "On his return?"

"Bah!" sharply answered Xenie. "He is your creature! It will be far too late then for any prudery—and you can enrage her with jealousy. She is born to rule! Only Madame Anykoff shall not be thrust upon her! Barbe est bien maladroite! You shall not find me fail you!"

There was an hour of stolen merriment in the gilded apartment, haunted with the gloomy heart-histories of a hundred daring intrigues.

"No! no, ma belle amie! You are not to brave the eyes of the curious to-night," said Anatole, when the midnight bells boomed out from the great polygon.

In ten minutes, the Grand Duke's own sleigh was at the private side postern, and Xenie, wrapped in a great pelisse of Imperial sables, laughed as they skimmed over the frozen snow, the troika bells ringing out on the crystalline air.

"You are a fit heiress of Lucrezia Borgia and Bianca Capello," laughed the crafty Imperial Prince.

"I am only your poor handmaiden," demurely smiled Xenie, "but, the peri at the gate of your bonnes fortunes."

"And now, give me all your further commands, till I meet you in Odessa!" whispered Anatole, as the sleigh dashed up to the door of the Maison Kriloff.

"I shall send you an Imperial order for a special train to and fro, and my own courier. Il se chargera de toutes les depenses!"

"Only find out Barbe in the ball," laughed Xenie. "She is one Undine of many, but, with three silver stars on her bosom, and our password, 'Sapho,' you can recognize her. Here are my billets de sureté! She is to bring all my furs and wraps! Tell her I wait for her to-night in her own room!"

"And, your pelisse, mon Prince?" laughed Xenie.

"I never take back presents!" laughed the Grand Duke.

"Then, I shall come and breakfast with Barbe in her apartment to-morrow. She is never to know of our compact! And you must be there! I am under the shield of your honor," softly said Xenie. "You may demand even my life—while you cover me from harm."

As she tripped up the marble stair, the Grand Duke drove gayly away.

"Sister of the Devil," he muttered; "but, I have need of her. There is but one way to handle women—make them trap each other!"

And, while the stars swept on high above Marie Wraxine at far-away Odessa, her enemies sharpened

their swords in the night, and Xenie laughed over her last present of the royal sable pelisse.

Two days later, an Imperial courier handed two muffled voyagers of distinction into the Grand Duke's own private train.

None of the dwellers in the Maison Kriloff knew of the dashing Xenie's destination, and only Alexandre Kalomine shared the secrets of the passionate heart which now ruled him.

Dupe and devotee, his own heart bounded as Xenie said: "I shall be free from all the toils of the past when I return!"

The Director of the Imperial Bank murmured his adieu: "Let no one come between us. What is rank? A mere bagatelle—the fool's gold of society! But, you shall secretly reign over these people here with me—on a pyramid of that gold for which kings cringe, and even coy beauty learns to bend its haughty head!"

"There is but one who has come between us, Alexandre," replied Xenie. "It is that grim iron King, Fate, and when I have tasted the one cup sweeter than Love's chalice—my revenge—I will come back to you!"

"Be my wife, Xenie," begged Kalomine.

"Only if I am free to love you as I would," she whispered. "For our hearts have spoken too late! I dare not now be your wife. Wraxine would kill me—for he fears me! But, if I am his conqueror, then do with me as you will! It is a battle to the death; and I must fight it out, unaided. But I shall win!"

On past the birch-fringed frozen lakes, on through gloomy, wolf-haunted forests, past log villages, now buried deep in snow; over cheerless, frozen steppes, the train glided along, flying southward as the swallow goes, or the keen-eyed stork winging his way across the Greek sea to Philæ's golden calm.

It suited the Baroness Xenie to be demurely quiet, and so, Barbe Anykoff glanced at the priceless pelisse of sables and wondered over the unwritten story of that masque ball at the Winter Palace.

No explanation was vouchsafed as the cheerless

Kherson steppes were crossed—only the curious Barbe knew that the Baroness Karovitch was specially favored by some august protecting influence.

For, when the train at last halted in la Grande Gare of Odessa, four days after leaving the Neva, there was an adjutant and a maître d'hôtel awaiting the voyagers.

A superb britska, with footman and coachman in a plain, rich livery, awaited them.

Madame Anykoff sighed in happy contentment as she gazed on the bright, beautiful city of four hundred thousand circling the chalky cliffs of the Euxine. There was no snow on the ground; the fresh breeze drifting in from the blue sea below had a spicy hint of the Isles of Greece.

By some one's order, the carriage traversed the splendid Boulevard from the Place du Theatre to the northern end!

There were hundreds of loungers walking under the four ranks of splendid trees, and dozens of carriages filled with the bright-browed aristocrats of Muscovy!

But the lively mélange of the streets at once attracted the eye.

Arab, Circassian, sly Hebrew, grave Turk, dapper Frenchman, and lazy Russian officials punctuated with beautiful women and ogling officers. All this made up a new coup d'œil. For, Odessa is the Russian Marseilles.

Suddenly, as they passed the Governor-General's Palace, where the grim sentinels were posted, an officer leaned out from a passing carriage and bowed stiffly.

The crimson leaped to Xenie Karovitch's face, for Excellence Baroness Marie Wraxine herself had affected not to observe the two visiting beauties! Only the General had bowed!

It was only when the "Venetian Lady" was ushered into her splendid boudoir that she safely gave vent to her anger.

The Adjutant had whispered: "His Highness will do you the honor to dine with you, informally, at eight! All the arrangements are made! The maître

d'hôtel has a carte blanche, and the carriage and servants will await your daily orders."

"Blessed magic of gold!" murmured Baroness Xenie as she directed her maid to prepare her most bewitching demi-toilette!

"As for this frozen star, Marie, she shall pay me now, to the uttermost farthing!"

During the entre actes of the opera the news of the arrival of the two St. Petersburg beauties was eagerly discussed in a dozen boxes.

His Highness the Grand Duke was laughing over Baroness Xenie's witty sallies in the boudoir, a veritable bower of roses now; for Madame Barbe had pleaded "headache" and slipped away when the saturnine General Wraxine, at the opera, returned Prince Paul Zastrow's grave salute.

The young Aid-de-Camp bowed to Madame Wraxine, in silence, as he delivered the official envelope bearing the seal of the Grand Duke.

The Corps Commander's face flushed crimson as he handed the invitation to his peerlessly beautiful wife.

"Acceptance is de rigueur," he murmured. "We must go! What brings her down here? Shall you call on her?"

And then, clear as crystal, came Marie Wraxine's icy answer: "It is for Madame Karovitch to make me the first visit!"

Across the gilded semicircle, Madame la Princesse Zastrow was now curiously eyeing the pair of illy-assorted wedded lovers!

"What can all this mean?" she murmured. "I wish that Paul had fixed his heart on the Lazienski or the Potocki! Here I am, the social drama on, and I bound for Sorrento, and the Corps Commander and Paul are suddenly ordered to the steppes—in midwinter!"

Before another week glided away, the Grand Duke's magnificent feast had given to Baroness Xenie a seal of Imperial approval.

Some softening influence had melted Marie Wraxine's icy heart, for Xenie Karovitch, graceful, charming, and tender, was now the home guest of the Wraxines!

In a sudden terror, the Corps Commander whispered to his wife: "We can not hold aloof from the Grand Duke's friend. She must be received!"

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER FALLEN STAR.

The old, old story! The serpent, in graceful guise, had entered the peaceful solitude of the stately home of the Wraxines. And, that anxious mother, the Princess Prascovie Zastrow, was on her way to Sorrento, Uneasy at heart, some days before, with a lowering brow, the astonished Corps Commander, General Wraxine, read the telegraphed orders of the War Minister detaching him and his chief aid for a long and minute inspection of the haras, to choose the fifteen thousand specially selected horses for the Rovno corps d'armee.

It was superbly done, this little "tour de force" of the Baroness Xenie, in gliding in between the absent husband and the proud wife.

And for a week before Baron Wraxine's departure the Grand Duke toiled with the Corps Commander in his library daily, only attended by his confidential aid, Prince Paul Zastrow. It was an intimate household entrée.

And there had been a formal dinèr de cérémonie given by the departing Corps Commander, where only the Vorontzoffs, the Grand Duke, and the Governor-General and his family were admitted to the circle where the unwelcome Xenie Karovitch was now the velvet-eyed Mephisto.

With a secret jealousy, Michel Wraxine saw the hidden adoration of the Imperial Grand Duke for the woman whom he had coldly dropped as a useless tool—a forgotten toy—and now, shamefaced in his fear, the general caught Xenie's hand, as he passed a tap-

estry-hung portière, in the dusky shadows, on the night of the dinner.

With one sad glance of appealing tenderness, and twinkling tears of regret, the sly beauty stole silently away!

"Great God! She knows all!" was Wraxine's last conscience-stricken thought. "And a single word, a mere dumb show of treason, could hurl me down!"

He went out on his sudden quest, so deftly ordered from St. Petersburg, not daring to tell his stately wife of the storm which raged in his bosom! He had not ever dared to attempt again a rapprochement, and long before he reached Kharkov, the Grand Duke, prudently suave and impassive, had taken up the pursuit of the beautiful Marie, whom he now sought with the patient, dogging tread of the untiring wolf.

And the treacherous Baroness Xenie, before a fortnight was past, had skillfully exhibited Madame Wraxine tête-à-tête with the Grand Duke in a dozen public functions.

With artful craft, she often glided away to spend her long afternoons with Madame Anykoff, now ruling her own Court of Love, and so, Marie Wraxine, obedient to her frightened husband's strict injunctions, dared not close the door to the Imperial visitor.

High souled and loyal, she had been touched by Xenie Karovitch's seemingly generous conduct in deftly ignoring the total breach!

And so, both the plotter and the victim-to-be, warmed themselves in the wintry glory of the Grand Duke's smiles.

A hundred hyena tongues were at once busied with the growing scandal, and only Marie Wraxine was deaf to the whispered murmurs as she swept serenely on through a horde of envious enemies.

The mad impulses of the winter fêtes now turned Odessa into a moral whirlpool. The broad avenues were crowded with rich carriages; the clubs, mansions, and restaurants were thronged with polyglot revelers.

Greek, Turk, Asiatic, Frenchman, pleasure-loving Austrian, stolid German—all crowded café and theater.

Only in the great mansions, the superb opera, the official halls, and the stately drawing-rooms, the haughty Russian army and navy officers, the reckless nobles, and the swarming aristocrats, led their life of wild social daring and reckless intrigue.

The presence of the Grand Duke and his brilliant staff excited the local aristocracy to a display never known since the great Catherine sent the fiery Duc de Richelieu down to found a seaside metropolis on the lonely shore, to-day only outdone in wealth and riot by pleasure-loving Marseilles.

The Easter days were drifting on. Already the steamers from Constantinople were bearing in the rich first fruits of the perennial spring of the Greek sea.

And while this Dance of Life went on, General Wraxine was still hurrying from one interior station to another.

His stern face, alone, was missed from the splendid festivities of the riotous social season. But, he felt a growing terror as he looked forward to the return to Rovno for the spring maneuvers, as the new constructions would call him back to his vast command.

Too well he knew that each changing order from the War Department had its secret origin in some hidden enemy at Odessa.

In vain he tortured his weary heart! He had several times sent the young Prince Paul Zastrow down to the White City on the Euxine Bay, and yet the messenger had gleaned no tidings of import!

Madame Barbe Anykoff was now queening it as a guest of the Russian Ambassador in Constantinople.

The Princess Prascovie Zastrow was still lingering under the silvery green of the Sorrento olive groves, and the Baroness Xenie calmly held her place as a perfunctory guest in the Wraxine household.

The letters of his enigmatic wife were as pulseless as the flow of water under the ice. Too well Wraxine now knew that only the bitter jibe of dependence had forced the daughter of Demetrius Kriloff unwillingly into his arms as a passionless sacrifice at the grim altar of Necessity.

And Xenie, the wild-hearted woman whom he had

once ruled as with a rod of iron, she was now socially impregnable in her position, for the Grand Duke seemed to be drifting under her influence more and more every day.

What unfathomable design lurked in Xenie's stormy soul? He knew not! And—he feared to question Paul Zastrow.

The young Aid-de-Camp himself was haggard of mien and gloomy of heart! An adept in every intrigue of court, boudoir, and camp, Zastrow knew that some fatal play was on, and that it was for stakes of heart and soul; that Michel Wraxine was a mere hoodwinked exile, and that Marie, the pale beauty who now ruled his own dreams, now moved helplessly, a Una among the lions.

Paul Zastrow had watched the faces of the players of the great game in vain! On his brief Odessa visits of duty he had gazed furtively at them all, lingering around the glittering table.

Baroness Xenie's velvet eyes gave no sign! Most of all around her, she feared the sharp-eyed young Aid-de-Camp.

The Grand Duke's face was haughtily inscrutable, and Marie Wraxine, too, possessed her soul in calm!

There had been no violent scandal, and as yet only a frightened hush followed the passing of that queenly form, the stately presence of the woman whom he madly adored in secret.

"Her proud heart still sleeps," mused the fiery Paul. "There is mystery here, and the shadow of a coming tragedy!"

Zastrow had resolutely ignored any social gossip, and in his attendance upon his stern Corps Commander went about his duty—"ohne hast, ohne rast!"

And, yet, the sweet face of Marie Wraxine haunted him in the silent night; it followed him over the cheerless, snowy Kherson prairies, and he saw it always in his dreams while drifting on the broad Volga.

But one warning sign had he noted at Odessa.

In his sudden entrée of the Cercle de Noblesse, the supper rooms of the Hotel du Nord, the café of the Hotel de l'Europe, in the gilded alcoves of the Palais

Royal, his own coming had suddenly cut off all chatter.

In the opera foyer, in the anterooms of the Governor-General—every gay flaneur—all the dashing staff officers prudently dropped the unfinished story until his departure.

And now too well he knew that the veiled reign of the Grand Duke—through the velvet-eyed devil located in General Wraxine's own home—was one of a cruel and luxurious social abandon.

In vain Prince Paul wandered alone around Odessa; all were his enemies, for there was wealth and patronage to be gained at the Grand Duke's hands.

The high financiers, the money-stuffed bourgeois, the careless Figaros of fashion, all avoided the young aid. No one cared to raise the warning voice.

The gay city only waited now for summer, when the Parc Alexandre, the luxurious bath houses, the alleys of Lustdorf, the groves of Maly-Fontan, and all the hundred hiding-places of lovers, would be given up to the mad votaries of Pleasure!

"And, after all," desperately cried Paul Zastrow, "it's only another fallen star! Let him find it out for himself! There is too fierce a light blazing around the Imperial throne for me to brave!"

And so, he hailed, with a secret joy, the day when he received his orders to send on his chargers and servants to Rovno for the spring maneuvers.

The fifteen thousand horses had at last been duly selected and inspected, the ice was fast leaving the rolling hills around the great camp, and fifty thousand armed men, casting off the winter lethargy, began to pour out of the heavy log huts where they had hibernated. The Russian Bear was stretching out his frozen paws!

The release came at last, and Prince Paul Zastrow's heart beat high as he rode down the Boulevard, at the head of General Wraxine's assembled staff, when the formal orders for the opening of the Rovno camp, after Easter, recalled the stern, winter-worn General to the last conferences of the two Corps Commanders and the Imperial Inspector at Odessa.

The tender leaves of spring were timidly budding out on the grand Boulevard, and the great white arms of the Port, stretching out into the bosom of the blue bay, grasped hundreds of ships, swarming with merry sailors.

The chatter and bustle of the great mart was on once more, and crowds thronged the magnificent escalier descending to the Port, three hundred feet below the embattled mansions of the great Boulevard.

Prince Paul had saluted his General at the threshold of his mansion, receiving his order to dine daily with his chief, and to take sole charge now of the assembled Corps Staff, gathered in an official headquarters hard by.

It was only when the young noble read the sheaf of letters handed over to him at General Headquarters that he began to see the veil lifting from the long winter's hidden intrigues.

From far-away Sorrento, the startled Princess Prascovie Zastrow laid upon her only son a solemn injunction.

"I am coming home as soon as Russia's icy arms are opened to me. My first duty shall be to have you transferred at once to another Corps! I shall ask it as a personal favor of the Czar himself! For I dare not tell you what I have heard! You, my son, are the First Aid-de-Camp and Chief of the Corps Staff! Beware of any further household intimacy with the ladies of General Wraxine's family! To you they are—they must be—sacred! For you are sworn to hold up the shield of his honor! There is safety only in silence! And now, I come to save you from the maelstrom! You have been designedly exiled all winter! Hold off your hand! For, the play is almost played out! And another plays the game—one whose cold resentment could crush us all! You must leave this Corps at once!"

A daring social free lance, a reckless duelist, a young paladin to whom no feat of arms was impossible, Paul Zastrow was a typical child of patriarchial Russia. He sat mutely day by day at General Wraxine's table, and mutely watched the brilliant entourage. There was a

vivid glow on Xenie Karovitch's cheek, a gleam of coming triumph shining in her eyes, which did not escape Zastrow, who easily marked the softened and almost submissive manner of the General toward his strangely vivacious guest.

And Madame Wraxine? Her star-like eyes shone out serenely, her habitual armor of an exquisite courtesy toward all masking every feeling of her lonely heart. Decidedly, "une femme incomprise!"

The strange social quiet of the splendid household affected Zastrow with the premonition of a coming storm.

The brooding peace was as of the silent forest when every trembling leaf is stilled, and only, at the last, a few straggling, sudden drops tell of the coming deluge, before the giant oaks are rended.

But, in the joyous peal of the Easter bells, all was seemingly forgotten! The orders were already out for the transfer of the Corps Headquarters and Staff.

Prince Zastrow, ever eager hearted, had plunged into all the wild excitements of the happy Easter holidays, only waiting for the arrival of the Princess Prascovie, who, by easy stages, was now coming on from Sorrento to Warsaw. The young Prince, perforce, deferred to his mother, to whom a wise father had left the bulk of the Zastrow fortunes, only to be delivered over to the young soldier at the age of thirty.

And so, at twenty-four, Paul Zastrow found the stream of coveted gold only trickling into his eager grasp through the firm, white hands of the spirited Princess. A wise precaution—it had been his only salvation so far.

The very last of the magnificent fêtes of the holiday season was the superb ball at which the proud General Wraxine made his adieu to the golden circle of luxurious Odessa's aristocrats.

For a week, the Grand Duke, at his headquarters, had been closeted with the Governor-General and the two southern Corps Commanders, in making general plans, and the Eighth Corps was already thrown out into its advanced stations.

The magnificent rooms of the Wraxine mansion

were, on this evening, thronged with the secretly curious aristocrats, who had followed the whole winter the unsolved mysteries of the Grand Duke's singular patronage of the dashing Baroness Xenie Karovitch, a mere bird of passage!

Paul Zastrow had dined, on this festal day, at the Staff Officers' Club, and, in the splendid uniform of his high rank, now led the assembled staff in to support the stately General Baron Wraxine in the reception of the assembled patricians.

The young Prince marked with surprise the absence of the Baroness Xenie Karovitch when Madame Wraxine took up her station with her stern-faced husband at the head of the great hall.

"It is well," he murmured. "This strange woman, Xenie, has effaced herself prudently. Nothing can happen now! For in two days we leave for Rovno. Madame Karovitch will soon return to St. Petersburg, and so, the long comedy is over. I fear a tragedy no more—only the wornout comedy of hollow hearts and vain pleasures!"

Paul laughed light heartedly at the dextrous manner in which la Baronne Karovitch had avoided facing the gossip of her hundred enemies and thus giving many opportunities for any public social revenge by the haughty aristocrats of southern Russia.

"It is a fine hand, this little woman," he mused, as he saw the splendid circle rapidly gathering in the vast salons.

"She avoids the issue—and, most gracefully!"

But one lingering suspicion of any coming trouble rested in Zastrow's mind. He alone knew from Baron Orloff, the Grand Duke's factotum, that the special train had arrived to take Baroness Xenie back to the Neva, and that Madame Barbe Anykoff, now returning from Constantinople, was already nested at the Hotel de Petersburg.

The sheen of silks, the gleam of bright eyes, the glitter of diamonds, the low, happy laughter of women, and all the kaleidoscopic splendor of the season's crowning ball, now filled the rooms; and yet—the

Prince Paul Zastrow looked around in vain for Madame Xenie Karovitch.

Whispers already filled the remote corners of the drawing-rooms as the music, pealing out in the great ballroom, drew the graceful youth of the Euxine Paris to the witching dance.

"The Grand Duke comes not"—the ominous murmurs rapidly went round; and a purple flush darkened Michel Wraxine's angry face as he stood at the head of the hall in waiting with his peerless wife!

It was a long half an hour of agonizing suspense to the tortured Corps Commander!

And yet, only he, of the whole brilliant assembly, knew that the public disgrace of the Grand Duke's social ostracism would mean to him a final ruin—perhaps even the discovery of his huge peculations, perhaps an awful ending—the shameful exile to Siberia.

A hundred hearts were thrilled with an electric shock as the music suddenly crashed out into the Russian National Hymn.

The great doors were thrown wide open as His Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Anatole entered the room, followed by his superb staff! There were gasps of surprise, as, on his arm, dressed with an exquisite simplicity, Madame la Baronne Xenie Karovitch glided along in a demure silence! But Paul Zastrow stood transfixed in a sudden shock, as, following the Imperial guest, the first Aid, Baron Orloff, escorted Madame la Générale Barbe Anykoff! General Wraxine's face relaxed in a frightful convulsion!

There was the stillness of death as the tall Grand Duke strode along bowing smilingly right and left to the guests, who had all respectfully turned and faced the Prince, as one born in the Imperial purple.

And the malicious Barbe Anykoff's eyes were discreetly dropped, but Xenie Karovitch, with a sweet composure, gazed frankly in the eyes of Michel Wraxine as she bowed, with a deferential modesty.

Paul Zastrow gazed in amazement at the circle of guests now hushed into a frightened expectancy by the appearance under the roof of the Corps Command-

er, of Madame Anykoff, whose presence in Odessa had been coldly ignored by the beautiful hostess.

General Michel Wraxine was a brave man, but he shuddered as he saw the sudden pallor which froze his beautiful wife into a marble statue.

With a stately grace, Marie bowed low before the Grand Duke, and then extended her hand to Xenie Karovitch.

But, the bow which singled out Baron Orloff left the defeated Barbe Anykoff pilloried in a quiet shame!

General Wraxine, with ready aplomb, broke up the line, stepping between his silent wife and the Grand Duke's glittering staff.

"The dancing only awaits Your Highness!" said Wraxine, his face paler than its wont.

And then, with a courteous bow, the Grand Duke possessed himself of Madame Marie Wraxine.

"It is for the hostess to open the ball," suavely remarked Anatole, the watchful.

With a violent effort, Marie controlled herself.

And then scores of eyes followed the agitated beauty as she glided into the graceful groupings of the wailing waltz, which sounded but faintly in her ear.

The whole room seemed reeling around her!

With one last glance she had noted the adroit Prince Paul Zastrow bowing over Xenie Karovitch's slender white-gloved hand, and in an instant they were mingling with the dancers. It was well done—and it broke up the spell of the malignant gossips.

A throb of gratitude stirred Michel Wraxine's heart as he noted Paul Zastrow's quick-witted action.

The quick-witted Baron Orloff was now guiding Barbe Anykoff's blond beauty along through the whirl and so—the Corps Commander turned away, relieved, but sick at heart, leaving the two gorgeous staffs to break up in search of the fairest of the would-be dancers! The revel was fairly on! And, standing alone by a recessed window, Michel Wraxine now vainly strove to read the riddle of the astounding social effrontery of the reckless Xenie Karovitch! The moody General knew now that he had not a single loyal friend in the wide world!

And Xenie—her placid face had given no sign of triumph. But the forced presence of Barbe Anykoff was an open declaration of war! He vainly strove to read the riddle of their sudden departure for St. Petersburg and the mystery-born aversion of Madame Anykoff to her old friend, his wife. But the undeniable support of the Grand Duke, the dazzling entrée of the two women—this alarmed him. He felt that the crisis of his life had arrived! And so, with all those curious eyes upon him, he sauntered away into a tapestry recess. “I must see her alone to-night, or else I am lost.”

He dared trust no one now! Paul Zastrow—there was a loyal soul! And, when Wraxine moved toward the ballroom, he saw the young Prince forming the lines for a gay mazurka. “His wife!”

Ah! There she was, seated with the Grand Duke, bowing in a stately salutation de cérémonie over the waltz.

The disloyal husband never knew of the whispered words which cut the Grand Duke like a whiplash! “You have broken your word of honor! You have not spared a dead soldier’s sister!”

For, Marie Wraxine’s heart had leaped up in one mad rebellion against all the duplicity around her!

Too late she saw how she had been helplessly dragged into a daily public intercourse with a pitiless intriguer, a man who had brought, this night, her most bitter enemy into her house to effect an open disgrace!

“And, now that the chase is on, he will hound me down!” she bitterly murmured.

The slender pearl fan in her hands snapped under the pressure of her nervous fingers!

From her seat, she could look out on the sea and see the great steamers gliding out on the misty blue zone below, their golden lights gleaming high at their mastheads, the red and green flashing on either quarter!

“My God! for peace, in some far land over the sea—for the quiet of the grave—or else, a Lethe under those darkened waves,” she murmured in despair.

Surrounded by bowing cavaliers, she held her stately court of silent sorrow in that peopled wilderness!

Help there was none! Her husband? When Xenie Karovitch was forced into the mansion by the Grand Duke's thinly veiled intrigue, Marie, lonely and abandoned at last, knew the fearful cost of her barren escape from actual poverty.

There had been a wall built up between husband and wife, and the General—a moral coward at heart—dared not face Xenie frankly, or boldly defend the honor of his hearth. His soul was forfeit!

And Marie now well knew the dexterity with which the fatal social stab had been administered—this last crowning public disgrace! Her eyes wandered over the room as she sat, declining all invitations to the dance. The Grand Duke was in the whirl of pleasure. He had brought the two women as if to an open casino. Madame Anykoff was vulgarly and insolently gay.

Marie Wraxine caught the furtive glances of Paul Zastrow's burning eyes, and then dropped her own! "He knows of this infamy—he has seen all!" the lovely orphan mused.

And then, her bosom swelled in a mad, fierce thirst for revenge! An unreasoning fury possessed her soul now!

Only to pull down this glittering card house of social hypocrisy upon the heads of all her hidden foes!

Pride was now her only sentinel, for she knew that hundreds of hostile eyes were upon her, and she scorned even to seek out her enemy, Xenie Karovitch, in all that splendid throng.

"They shall not see me suffer!" she resolved, with a strange, silent rage filling her heart.

With a haughty determination, she only waited now for her revenge, at any cost; and none of the revelers ever marked even the quiver of a lip.

But, in that single hour, the unloosed passions of a fearless nature raged sovereign in her stormy heart.

"There comes the morning soon," she murmured. "Wait—wait! I shall find the easiest way to my revenge!"

With the music beating in his ears, General Wraxine

had stolen away for a few moments to his library, leaving the gay rout below, to ask himself in what way he could compass a last secret meeting with Xenie Karovitch.

Prince Zastrow had spoken to the General, by mere chance, of the special train now in waiting to take Baroness Xenie and her reckless ally, the Anykoff, back to the Neva.

And in a glance he fancied that he now saw the veiled mechanism of the secret orders which had kept him so long out on the steppe all winter.

"She is only the spy of the Grand Duke," he muttered, "and I must win her over—or else buy her silence!"

He was facing these gloomy alternatives, when he saw a lithe form glide by his door.

His heart bounded as he leaped madly forward.

It was Xenie Karovitch stealing into Madame Wraxine's boudoir, adjoining his own library.

He had not even heard her light foot upon the stair!

And, resolutely entering the room, he closed the door, for the mockery of the music below maddened him.

With a start of feigned surprise, the victorious Xenie turned and gazed into that well-known face, so strangely haggard.

"You here, Michel!" she gasped.

"I must speak to you! I must know your heart!" he hoarsely cried.

The beautiful witch pointed to the dressing-room adjoining, with its open door draped only with a thick Persian portière.

The General explored the adjoining interior.

"No one," he muttered, as he returned to find Xenie sitting awaiting him with her telltale eyes covered with her slender hands. The panther was ready to spring!

There was that in his eyes which smote Xenie, brave as she was, with a sudden fear. "You go away tomorrow," he said.

And the artful woman saw in his eyes that he now knew all her past duplicity!

She sat silently listening as the tortured General poured out his stormy heart imaginings.

There was a delicious sense of triumph in Xenie Karovitch's heart! It was sweet to drink in the self-abasing words of the man before whom fifty thousand trembled; the man who had long been an iron-hearted ruler to her; the man who would have thrust her out to starve when he hoped that the girl-wife, won by a taunt of misery, would be as wax in his hands!

Spurred on by a sudden intuition, the beautiful hostess, now on her guard, had at last noted the absence of the velvet-eyed Xenie!

And so, on the arm of Prince Vorontsoff, she had made the whole circuit of the grand drawing-rooms. She read the riddle, for the stately form of Michel Wraxine was not visible!

True, the Grand Duke and Madame Barbe Anykoff were now the center of a glittering ring, but those whom she sought were not in the merry throng below!

Stealing through a side entrance, Marie Wraxine, with a bitter smile of self-contempt, glided up the private stairway.

Like a wraith, she flitted across the broad upper corridor and noiselessly gained the private entrance to her own apartments.

Her light foot made no sound on the floor of her dressing-room, padded deep with its costly Persian rugs.

In her heart now raged only a mad desire for instant vengeance.

When she heard the first words of the forgetful schemers who once would have sold her to shame, she blindly cast away all thoughts of the past—all care for her future!

For Michel Wraxine was basely pleading in a passionate frenzy to the woman who had so brutally betrayed her and would have sold her, helpless, to the man who had quivered under the scorn of her whispered words there in the crowded ballroom. Xenie was only the Grand Duke's harem guardian!

The panther was playing now with the helpless wretch in her claws.

There had been murmured words which Marie could not hear, but her heart swelled in a mad rage, when Xenie at last threw off the mask.

"And now you plead to me—you, Michel Wraxine—when you tried to thrust me out of your life! You, who have used this pale-faced, pauper beauty only as a bait to the Grand Duke! You married her only to sell her to him in the safe shame of a safe complaisance! You know it—the whole world knows it! And, know now, that I am the friend of your money-master! The great Necker looks to me to shield him through the Grand Duke's favor! Your swindling partnership is only safe in my hands because the Grand Duke is my friend! He is not too proud to kneel before the woman whom you cast off! You were my lover for years! One word from me, and you would be stripped of the baubles gleaming there on your coat! And I have loved you so! You, a man and a soldier, to thrust out the woman in whose arms a hundred times you vowed a life's fidelity! Do you remember your oaths at Tiflis when you sent me to trap this raw girl as a prey to the Grand Duke's wandering fancy? You have bought your command cheaply with her promised smiles!"

"And, while you love me no more, you shall learn to fear me now! Do you wish me to tell her? Now you know why I have returned to your household; you dare not ignore the Grand Duke's friend—and she shall not! The Grand Duke shall feast his fancy to the full!"

There was a frenzied woman, with murder in her heart, listening, spellbound, on the other side of the portière, when the abject Michel Wraxine, on his knees, covered Xenie Karovitch's hands with kisses.

"Hear me," he begged. "You shall rule—you shall be the Queen of Rovno! Come back to me! There—let me only love you as before! Xenie, I swear that you shall work your will! Tell the Grand Duke—" He was saved utter degradation, for there was a startling knock at the library door!

Marie—half stunned—had only time to hide herself in the folds of the huge portière as Xenie Karovitch

glided out past her, stumbling along in the dark room.

The victorious intrigante knew every winding of the vast mansion, and she was standing laughing in the doorway of the reception-rooms long before General Wraxine, in the lonely library, gazed in speechless silence at a telegram handed to him by his Aid-de-Camp, Prince Paul Zastrow.

"His Highness' compliments. Sudden orders, General!" was the young noble's formal salutation. "And, His Highness desires to speak with you at once."

There was only the sound of the retreating footsteps of the two men as Marie Wraxine stole into her deserted boudoir.

With unfaltering steps she swiftly locked the doors into the library, the doors to the main corridor, and then gazed long at herself in the chêval glass.

And there, in the silence of her own apartment, Marie Wraxine forever took leave of her old self!

Seizing a taper, she lighted all the candles in her dressing-room.

No sound escaped her lips as she gazed around the familiar apartment.

There, on the fauteuil where Xenie Karovitch had been coldly plotting the sale of a soul, lay a filmy lace handkerchief broidered with the telltale coronet and X.

"Under this flag she betrays—the white flag of peace," grimly muttered Marie Wraxine.

She grasped it and then swept grandly down the main marble staircase to the supper-rooms.

The Intendant, bowing low, whispered to the stately beauty: "The General has been searching for you everywhere. The banquet is soon to begin, and the General is closeted with the Grand Duke."

Marie Wraxine lifted her steady eyes and saw standing before her, in the main reception hall, the woman who had betrayed her, both before and after the fatal marriage.

There was a circle of eager gallants around Xenie; they saw nothing as Madame Wraxine approached, but, Xenie Karovitch shuddered when she met the glance of the young wife's eyes.

Without a word, the hostess handed the startled Xenie the bit of embroidered lace, and then silently turned away, as Prince Paul Zastrow hastened toward her.

"There has been a fierce riot between the soldiers and peasantry at Rovno," whispered the young Aid. "The General leaves in two hours, on a special train. It is to me that he leaves the duty of bringing on the household. He asked me to conduct you to him in the special reception-room. His Highness does not wish to spoil the fête."

As they moved down the crowded hall murmurs followed them—"What a peerless couple!"

But with a quaking heart, Xenie Karovitch watched the lovely orphan disappear in the happy throng.

Her jeweled hands trembled!

"She knows all!" was the affrighted woman's keen interpretation of the glance of undying hatred in the eyes which had cursed her to eternity with their unspoken malediction.

"There will be a terrific arraignment of the General—and—Marie would not even spare the Grand Duke. She is capable of any mad deed now!"

The alarmed Xenie leaned forward and signaled Barbe Anykoff with her eyes. There was but one coup de stratégie left! The special train stood ready for a departure when the fête was done! The route to Moscow and Petersburg avoided all the dangerous points of possible meeting.

As Barbe Anykoff leaned over her friend, Xenie whispered: "I feel strangely ill! Let us quietly steal out!"

"Sans adieu?" muttered the startled woman.

"Yes! We will go directly to the station! The train is ready, the Intendant and my maid have all prepared for an instant departure."

Barbe Anykoff stole upstairs; in a few moments the first carriage in waiting received the two fugitives.

Before the health of the Emperor had been drunk at the feast, the special train was whirring along with a lightning speed toward Birzoula.

Xenie Karovitch was no coward at heart, but she dared not meet Marie's eyes again!

"Once back in St. Petersburg I am safe," she murmured. "I hold this fool Wraxine through Necker's tyranny of money! And he will be glad to grovel at my feet! The Grand Duke dare not betray me! And, pour en enfinir, there is always Kalomine!"

The wailing music of the ball was still ringing in her ears as she fell into a tired sleep.

To Barbe Anykoff she had roughly cried, "To-morrow—to-morrow!" and, although the Grand Duke's maître d'hôtel, watching the train speeding away, wondered at the haste of the flight, yet he faithfully bore to his master, on the Grand Duke's return from the fête, the few words which Xenie had scrawled. "Devil take all these light-minded women! Would-be Helens, every one!" cried the disgusted Grand Duke. "But, this frozen Venus is mine at last. The woman can not escape me now!"

There was no surprise on Marie Wraxine's lovely face when the Grand Duke, in a few words, stated the instant necessity of the departure of the Corps Commander. "I will go myself to the station, Madame, with General Wraxine, and accompany him. We will steal away, so as not to interrupt the Easter feast! I have asked Prince Vorontsoff to preside here with you! And so, we will all meet soon again at Rovno!"

Marie silently bowed her graceful head as the Grand Duke, marshaled by Prince Paul, left the room.

The young Aid, seeking out the Grand Duke's staff, returned to report the carriages at the door.

In the few moments of their isolation, Michel Wraxine hurriedly gave his silent wife his last commands.

"I will send this same train back for you. The Intendant will transport all our personal belongings. Paul Zastrow will remain, and will have sole charge of the train, with the Grand Duke's private orders! You will find Villa Lubomirski open to receive you!"

Before Marie could answer, Prince Paul announced the Grand Duke as waiting in the carriage.

Behind him stood Wraxine's servant, with his master's sword, pelisse, and chapeau.

"Au revoir at Rovno!" hastily cried Michel Wraxine, as with a throb of cowardly joy, he hastened down the marble corridor. It was a blessed release!

And then, with a stately step, Marie Wraxine took old Prince Vorontsoff's arm and sat—a throned queen—at the head of the feast.

In all the merry mirth of the splendid supper, the betrayed wife's eyes roved around the table. The disappearance of Baroness Karovitch and her ame damnée had not been noticed.

But rumors of the great mutiny at Rovno now filled the halls, and none wondered at the sudden departure of the Grand Duke and his General-in-Chief.

It was only when Prince Paul Zastrow, with a wild yearning in his eyes, led her aside, after the supper, that Marie knew of the departure of the two women on a special train.

Her eyes seemed to flash lightning as she now turned her passionate glances upon the young Apollo, whose heart almost stopped beating.

A witching waltz was filling the halls with its seductive, passion-laden throb!

Standing there, their eyes had met in a wordless prayer—a voiceless self-surrender!

Out among the circling dancers they glided; he felt her wild heart beat warmly against his own; they were at last one, in soul and spirit.

It was in the far shadows of the tapestried corridor that the love-maddened Prince murmured: "Marie—life is for us alone—the love of eternity!"

And then, soft as the falling dews of night, she whispered: "Paul! I have a heart to throw away! Only this—you must take me out of Russia!"

"Darling!" he murmured, "Fate has joined our souls to eternity! I have worshiped you since I held the crown of gold over your dear head!"

"Go now!" she faltered. "Come to me at noon!" He laid his burning lips upon her hand. "Forever!" he sighed.

When the last reveler had gone, Marie Wraxine stood alone at her open window!

The gleaming white stars hung over her in the misty

blue. She tore off the glittering ornaments which decked her love-tortured breast.

"They would sell me for a price! I give myself to the man who loves me!" she cried. And then, across the dark vault, trailed a gleaming, falling star!

CHAPTER VIII.

A DIPLOMATIC QUEST.

For two days after the magnificent Easter ball of the Wraxine's, there was a flood tide of gossip in every boudoir and club in gay Odessa.

The opera foyer and the gilded boxes were crowded with eager quid nuncs.

In some mysterious way, the strange departure of the two St. Petersburg Birds of Paradise from the ball, and the sudden following of the Grand Duke and General had been connected.

In vain did the Governor-General's staff officers assert that the Baroness Xenie's train had departed, by the right, from Jmerinka to Koursk and Moscow, and that an Imperial private train, known by its blue cars and red silk curtains, had been traced on beyond Koursk.

"Yes, and," laughed the doubting gossips, "that last train was empty! But, by Kazatin and Louninetz, the two women who had been exalted into Queens of a night, could easily reach Smolensk, and go on to St. Petersburg, traveling all the way to Rovno, with the Grand Duke."

But one man in Odessa no one dared to ask a question! It was the busy Prince Paul Zastrow, whose handsome face was seen only in glimpses at the great Gare, or else dashing along the Boulevard in a closed carriage.

The evening of the second day after the departure of the Grand Duke Anatole and General Wraxine, saw the departure of the entire servants and household lug-

gage of General Wraxine on the goods' train hastily made up under Prince Paul Zastrow's orders.

"The happy family is at last en route," sneered the watchful Chef de Police, as he strode out of his office, and, slipping off his uniform, went out for an evening en Haroun al Raschid.

"Thank God they are all out of Odessa!" he sighed, in happy relief.

And, morning dawning, found the mansion of the Wraxine's on the Boulevard all closed and deserted, save by a shock-headed dvornik.

It was ten o'clock when the Governor-General of the Province entered his audience-room, in the official palace on the Boulevard.

General Tchernikoff was in a most charming humor. He had been a social star of the magnificent Easter ball of the Wraxine's, and he had enjoyed a petit déjeuner with a long-resistant Delilah, as a result of that superb fête.

And, also, on the night before, he had won a thousand gold Imperials from his chum, Prince Vorontsoff.

He had passed a happy morning half hour on the balcony of his Headquarters over a prime cigar, the firstling of a dozen boxes sent on by the Grand Duke from the Imperial cabinet. And, as the Governor-General of New Russia, watched below him a beautiful white-hulled steam yacht of two hundred tons gliding out of the Port, he felt that the vice-royalty of the great Kherson was a very pleasant thing.

Looking forward to a tête-à-tête dinner with his repentant, long-sought Aspasia, he listlessly turned over the telegrams handed to him by Colonel Dobrovitch, his Chief Aide.

"Ah! The Grand Duke Anatole has safely reached Smolensk!" he murmured. "The mutiny could not have been so very serious. He orders all the cattle vans of the whole Kherson moved up to Elizabethgrad to transport the horses of the Rovno Corps. Send this to the Commander of the Eighth Corps! To report instantly by despatch to Smolenski!"

Tearing open a second envelope, the Governor murmured:

"Prince Paul Zastrow to report to the Grand Duke personally at Smolensk, forthwith."

"That means that Paul will be an Imperial Aid-de-Camp soon! Lucky fellow! The handsomest man in Russia! He will be a General at thirty! Send him this instantly."

"And, stay, Dobrovitch! Here are two telegrams for Excellence Madame General Marie Wraxine—on her special train! Send them off instantly!"

And then, after gracefully granting a few petitions, the Governor-General leisurely drove down to the "Cercle de Noblesse."

After his particularly "soignée" breakfast, the great man disappeared, and was not officially found until at eleven o'clock that evening, when the two sentinels clashed their muskets in a hasty "present arms" as the haughty noble stepped out of a private coupé.

At the door, Colonel Dobrovitch, with anxious eyes, hastened his master into his private cabinet.

"It is astounding, High Excellence," he faltered; "but, you must pardon my lack of ceremony. The Chief of Police awaits you in the office. I have just returned from the Commander of the Eighth Corps! The whole city has been searched!"

"What do you mean?" cried the conscience-stricken Governor, still thrilled with the memories of his little "diner à deux." "There is always some devilish thing happening in Russia!"

Poor Dobrovitch's hand went up in a formal salute.

"The Prince Paul Zastrow is nowhere to be found!"

The Governor-General dropped his golden cigarette-case. He was astounded!

"And, Madame la Générale Wraxine, neither!"

The stout Colonel hung his head in shame.

"Fool! They must have left on the special train!" roared the Governor, still fighting against his sudden suspicions.

And then, Dobrovitch turned and silently admitted the Chief of Police, who shivered under the glare of the Governor's eyes.

"You know nothing?" he fiercely cried. "You!"

The frightened Chief saluted. "The special passen-

ger train of two cars and an engine has waited all day, High Excellence, at the station, with steam up! Madame's maid is there, but, she knows nothing! I could get no orders from you! No one knew where you were!"

And then, the sly police agent saw that he had barely saved his Colonel's shoulderstraps.

"The house—have you searched it?" the Governor snapped out.

"My two best Lieutenants and the house dvor-nik have gone all over it. It was simply a maison garnie. Excellence Madame Wraxine left this morning in a carriage, alone, at seven o'clock! The carriage has returned, leaving her in the Parc Alexandre! She has not been seen since. The home is empty of all General Wraxine's belongings! It is a mystery!"

"Prince Zastrow?" demanded the noble, with a strange new light in his eyes, "Superintended the dispatch of all the household yesterday; sent the last effects and the maid down to the train, now here, this morning, and then drove away in a carriage."

The Governor-General tore open three or four new dispatches and sadly eyed Dobrovitch.

The flush of anger flamed over his face. "Has nothing left the city unsearched to-day?" he demanded, turning to the trembling Chief of Police.

"Only the Norwegian steam yacht 'Oscar,'" murmured the Chief. "No police inspection was had, as she had a 'permis de l'Ambassade' at Constantinople."

A light now broke in upon the great official's troubled mind.

"Dobrovitch," he said, "let us go over to the Swedish Consul-General, you and I, instantly!"

With a wave of his hand, he motioned to the Chief of Police to await his return.

"If you do not solve this mystery," he growled, "you will be a junior Lieutenant to-morrow night!"

And then, the man who had dreamed away the happy evening hours in "*les bonnes fortunes*" sighed:

"Poor Wraxine! This is but the revenge of outraged nature—of a young soul betrayed into the impossible of life!"

In an hour, the Governor-General slowly returned. His accent was kindly as he bade the Chief of Police depart.

"Keep this absolutely secret—in mercy—as long as you can! I have sent a staff officer up to Rovno! That will take sixty hours! In the meantime privately sift this whole matter, and report only to me in person!"

It was long after midnight when General Tchernikoff dismissed his old comrade, Prince Vorontsoff.

Colonel Dobrovitch had brought an armful of charts.

"If they do not stop at Constantinople, they can safely make Malta in seven days," gloomily stated the Chief of Staff.

"There is no power to seize the yacht, Vorontsoff?" sadly queried General Tchernikoff.

"Not on the high seas," moodily answered the civilian noble. "And Count Lidstrom, the owner, left last night for Galatz! If he loaned the yacht to Paul Zastrow probably he knows nothing! If Zastrow hired it, we are then equally powerless!"

The two silver-haired nobles had kept up the masquerade of a little midnight supper to blind all the junior officials.

At three o'clock, Vorontsoff wrapped his furs around him, and was escorted to the Governor-General's carriage.

"Poor Wraxine!" he sighed. "Let him find it out for himself! It is the crowning disgrace of a splendid career!"

Governor-General Tchernikoff restlessly walked his balcony, watching for the faint flush of dawn, while the red light of his cigar burned as fiercely as a beacon of the dying night!

"The Grand Duke," he murmured, "Baroness Xenie, la belle Anykoff, this chivalric mad-hearted boy—they have all driven that high-spirited soul out of her sphere! This marriage to Wraxine was only a hollow sacrifice. Ah! My God! To think of Hélène Souvaroff's daughter having no shield from the world's scorn now, but the honor of her seducer! Another fallen star—another fallen star!"

And the man who habitually sinned in safety, cloaked around with a mantle of hypocrisy, gazed down along the future years, shuddering at the coming tragedy of Marie Kriloff's life! And he had himself sent so many innocent women on that easy grade down to a hell in life!

But, out on the darkling waters the swift, lean "Oscar" sped along over the Euxine waves, her white sides gleaming like the silver galley of Venus! None knew on the fairy pleasure boat of the dark imaginings of the lonely Pearl Queen, as she gazed back at the fog-veiled shores of Odessa!

Her bruised and tortured heart was still filled with the grim incense of revenge.

"I have dragged him down," she exulted; "they dare not explain—the story is one that they dare not tell!"

And so, passion swept, she knew not whither, she was being dragged along! Paul Zastrow had told her of the fair land far over the sea where they would be free from all pursuit.

Out beyond the Pillar of Hercules, far over the green Atlantic, lay the land where the lovers would find the eternal glow of a summer of the heart!

"I know not the land—not even the language—and I shall be a stranger there, Paul!" sobbed the woman, at whose feet he knelt in the first ecstasies of love's delirium!

"You have my honor for your shield and buckler—my life, my love—my own Marie," he murmured, covering her hand with burning kisses.

And, so on, to glide through the eternal sea-gates of the old Roman world, to float under the purple shores of Mitylene, to drift past Sicily's enchanted shores, the lovers, a flickering hope in their hearts, left a clouded life and perished honor behind them!

The unknown future lay before them veiled in the gray mists of the night which closed down upon them.

It was three days after the fleet "Oscar" had dipped below the blue rim of the southern horizon, when General Wraxine's Chief of Staff gloomily listened to the story of the boatman who had ferried the fugitives

out to the "Oscar," and the final report of the gloomy Chief of Police.

The mantle of shame was now thrown over the dethroned Pearl Queen.

Sadly the Governor-General translated to the messenger from Kovno the cipher dispatches of the Grand Duke, and then said:

"Your Chief knows the worst now! You shall learn all! Take home this story locked in your breast! I will send the Chief of Police back with you! Alas! It is life! In a month, all gilded Russia will know of Wraxine's broken life—of the fallen star's flight—and then there remains nothing but Michel Wraxine's shame, and the breaking of the heart of the lovely girl!"

The astounded Chief of Staff brushed tears from his eyes.

"Poor, betrayed girl; even death is better than this!"

And the haggard Governor-General grasped his hands in a remorseful silence!

"Go back to your master! Perhaps death will be merciful! Even his death would be better than this living shame!"

It was a ghastly denouement, and the hardened men of the world trembled in facing it!

While they buried Marie Kriloff's disgraced name out of sight at St. Petersburg, once more, Xenie Karovitch's light foot pressed the velvety Persian tapestries of the Palace. The Grand Duke Anatole, crazed with a disappointed passion, now faced the scornful beauty, in whose pitiless eyes a latent triumph burned.

"You still long for her—soiled as she is! Telegraph to his mother at Sorrento! The Princess Prascovie will surely know!"

"I want her, Xenie," slowly growled the man who had hounded the White Queen out of her sphere. "I want her—to pay the price—I want to follow her over the earth! And, I want you," he cried, in a sudden passion, "to be the woman to follow her on for me—downward—down into the depths! You shall reign in my heart, for you have red blood in your veins! But as for this fool, she shall suffer!"

It had been an astounding revelation to Xenie Karovitch, and the wary Grand Duke had well used the element of surprise. For, the Baroness Xenie had not dared to share her own secret with that gay, free lance of fortune, Madame Barbe Anykoff!

The artful woman had only arrived at home at the Maison Kriloff, and after a night's rest, was now considering the problem of leaving the Place Michel.

In the terrific social explosion which she now awaited, as the result of the warfare between husband and wife, she had decided to cleave to the Grand Duke; to terrify General Wraxine through the Necker firm, and then, to separate herself slyly from Barbe Anykoff!

"If there is a disaster, she will not share it; should there be profit, it is to be mine alone!"

The slavish infatuation of Alexandre Kalomine offered her a hidden home of her own, and she had determined to take a refuge there.

She had donned her most ravishing toilette de sortie to see her lover, when the Grand Duke's private carriage rolled into the court below.

"A la bonne heure!" she laughed, as she was whirled away, through the chilly spring day, to the Winter Palace.

And, by a strange caprice of Fortune, she had pleased the Grand Duke! For, when he suddenly read to her the first cipher dispatch of the Governor-General of Odessa, he saw in her face the shock of a surprise beyond all words.

"Paul Zastrow is the man!" she cried, springing up! "They never noticed each other's presence! And he was away all the winter! They hid their deviltry neatly!"

The Grand Duke Anatole laughed grimly. "Certain stars shot madly from their sphere! Some cataclysm, unknown to us, has then thrown them into each other's arms!"

Xenie Karovitch listened, with a beating heart, as the jealousy-crazed Anatole proceeded.

"This is not your work or mine! She shall drink the cup of bitterness! You are not to go back to Rovno—you are not to go to Odessa—you are to break off all

relations with General Wraxine! I will follow your advice! I shall instantly telegraph all to the Princess Prascovie Zastrow! You must see that this is Paul's ruin! He forfeits the titles to his estate—all succession—as a Russian deserter! He has no passport—he never dare re-enter Russia. There is but one safe refuge for him!"

"Yes!" hastily whispered Xenie. "He will go to America with her! He speaks English superbly. She, poor wretch, not a word!"

"You will take your cue from me," calmly continued the enraged Grand Duke. "I do not choose to have your name or mine connected with this! Princess Prascovie will soon post on here and throw herself on the clemency of the Czar! I wish to gain her full confidence, so as to follow on this loving couple! You must not discuss this with her! Break off with General Wraxine! I will have further use for you! And if you can hold your peace, then your fortune is made! Had she any money?"

"Not a rouble," sneered Xenie; "only a few trumpery diamonds and an old pearl necklace!"

"Good!" growled the Duke; "they will soon feel the gnawing of the wolf! Paul gambles, and he has not a dollar! His mother, too, has but a slender estate! This will soon ruin them all!"

"And, now," smiled Xenie, "I am yours, quand même! Tell me what I shall do! I can not linger on the Place Michel!"

"No—not another moment!" cried the Grand Duke, springing up and pacing the floor.

He mused a few minutes, and then seating himself beside the woman, bewitching in her hour of secret triumphs, said:

"You are to leave the Place Michel without one word of confidence with Barbe Anykoff! Ignore her—that's my order! You and I must be untouched by the crash of the scandal. Go to the Hotel de l'Europe! Install yourself there to-day, for a month, *en princesse*. I may need you to go to England, or perhaps on to America! I fancy that the motherly Princesse Prascovie will soon follow this young brute. She adores

him! I will see Alexandre Kalomine, the Director of the Imperial Bank. He shall find you a pretty little datcha on the islands, and a jewel-box of a little house on the Admiralty Quai."

Xenie's eyes filled with happy tears of joy.

"Leave the Place Michel to-day," imperatively said the Grand Duke. "Kalomine will supply all your wants. My maitre d'hôtel, Jean Beraud, will bring all my letters to you! As for our meetings—you must come here to me! The wilderness of the Winter Palace is the safest place on the Neva!" he laughed.

"And now, to our little breakfast! Remember! One whisper of womanly chatter, and over the frontier you go, never to return! I must hold you up above all this Rovno and Odessa circle to clear my own name! For I will not have the world know that a callow boy has defeated me, and dragged off this pretty fool! I will thwart them all with the Emperor—he never shall pardon them!"

"I will obey. You can have my life itself—in your service," cried Xenie, in a transport of joy. "Only tell me—poor old Wraxine, the General—what of him?"

The tall patrician clenched his fist and struck the table a resounding blow.

"Fool and dotard! He shall be ruined—disgraced. His Tartar brutality has frightened this shy girl away! I dare not strike him down openly! If he asks to be relieved, I will have to flatter and compliment him. But, let this drift on a month or so! Then he shall be suddenly deprived of his command for alleged irregularities, and sent out to Kamtchatka or Saghalien to watch a huddle of convicts there for ten years! The climate will kill him in a season or so—but, he must not come down with a crash. After this storm has blown over, he will be pulled down by another hand than mine! It is the safest way!"

When the gay little breakfast was concluded, the Grand Duke himself led Xenie to the private postern of the higher staff.

"Not a word from you to a soul! I go now to telegraph Princess Prascovie! To-morrow, Jean shall wait on you! Use him for anything you wish! I must see

you bien installée, as I shall soon leave here for two weeks! So, I will ride out the storm! I will handle Wraxine, and come back here to meet Princess Pras-covie! And I shall turn her over to you. You are to represent all the outraged honor of the Kriloff's and Souvaroff's! Thus, with you and I, ma belle, en harmonie, we can trap this white-faced Phryne and the mad young deserter! His fleeing from the army forfeits his title! We will next hear of him—outre mer! America is the receptacle of all male and female deviltry!"

Before sunset, Madame la Baronne Xenie Karovitch was laughing over her victories in a princely apartment of the Hotel de l'Europe.

The fortunate absence on an Easter party at Tsarskoe-Zeloe of Barbe Anykoff, allowed Xenie to leave the Place Michel forever without a word of gossip.

The golden-haired widow was not there to question. To the astonished Elia and his alter-ego, Marie, the victorious human vulture sternly said: "You are to get your orders only from General Wraxine now—or the Excellence herself. I am soon leaving the country—that is all!"

"A splendid denouement it will be," laughed Xenie, as she drove away. "For nothing is known as yet, and I am protected from all intrusion!"

Three things made Xenie's heart happy! Well she knew why she had been placed in the magnificent hotel palace on the rue Michel and the Perspective Nevsky! "He is an artful tyrant of love—Anatole," she laughed. "Every move that I make will be known to him there—every letter—every visit! This is one good point: it covers my hidden friendship with Alexandre. En second, Alexandre must soon know of the Grand Duke's trust in me! That rivets him to me! When this human ghoul has slaked his revenge, Alexandre can quietly marry me—we are now both protected—and thus, I rule both the Neckers and the Grand Duke; for Wraxine will be soon effaced! Ah! my letter reached him at Rovno before even the news of his wife's flight! That was a tour de force worthy of Cath-

erine the Great! I have paid off this old wolf Wraxine in his own shame!"

And, dining merrily alone, under the sheen of crystal and silver, the mellow glow of the wax lights, that evening Xenie felt secure at last in her own wicked heart. "Alexandre knows that I am fenced in with golden fetters here! But, when Anatole is beyond Moscow, I can steal away to Viborg, and Kalomine shall know all that I care to give him, until we marry—with the Grand Duke's special sanction. The pretty datcha—the little gem of a house—my magnificent tyrant Anatole shall be my slave now, my future friend—with Alexandre as a safe buckler! For, the Grand Duke is under the golden wheels of the money-chariot of the Imperial Bank!" It was a pleasing reward of consistent virtue!"

Far away at Rovno, on this eventful evening, General Wraxine was sitting alone in the library of the Villa Lubomirski.

The lights of the great camp twinkled around like swarms of golden fireflies.

He was pale and his eyes showed the sullen ferocity of the wolf! The rich dinner lay all untasted before him, and he had swallowed great drafts of fiery brandy in his impatience.

He had been alarmed by the Grand Duke going whirling on up to Wilna and St. Petersburg.

He was further maddened by the absence of his wife; and a ferocious growl escaped him as he thought of Paul Zastrow's silence.

He only awaited the return, at daybreak, of his Chief of Staff, who had telegraphed from Odessa: "Coming alone."

Busied with the instant repression of the serious frays between the peasantry and the soldiers, awaiting the pouring in of fifty trains bearing the first installments of the fifteen thousand horses; occupied with plans of greed and gain; dreaming of the golden harvest of the new constructions, he had hardly noted the receipt of the telegram detaching Prince Paul Zastrow as Chief Aid-de-Camp to the Grand Duke, and order-

ing him to report forthwith to the Grand Duke, on the Neva.

But—his wife! The non-arrival of the woman whom he had already, in his heart, betrayed to the lowest shame, had startled him!

He recalled Xenie's ominous prediction! "You will find her, some day, to be a stubborn, untamable soul, a heart of flame—a will of spring steel!"

Michel Wraxine dared not ask the Grand Duke why he had made the theoretic entrée at the Easter ball with Baroness Xenie and the unwelcome Barbe Anykoff; but, with a sullen, red glow of anger in his heart, he only waited for the return of his Chief of Staff.

The Corps Commander dared not quit his post for an instant. He felt that some sudden revolt of his wife's outraged pride had caused her to delay coming on, though the servants and the heavy luggage had just arrived.

Too proud to question them, he now burned to see his Chief of Staff face to face.

Colonel Tcherchinsky was a grizzled old family man who had followed Wraxine's upward course for many a year, through battle smoke, and desert exile.

"Marie—this stubborn, intractable fool—shall feel my displeasure;" he growled, "for, I will tame her, even if her wild heart breaks!"

He felt the insult that there was neither a line, a telegram, nor a message to explain the astounding delay!

"Surely, if anything had happened they would have let me know the facts." He thought of the Governor-General, the Eighth Corps Commander, and the princely old Vorontsoff—all stanch comrades and fellow-aristocrats.

"Whom can I trust?" he bitterly groaned. "The world envies me this brilliant command! Xenie? Can it be that this she-devil, Xenie, has told Marie aught? How could she? Her train left before ours! We passed it on the side switch at Birzoula!"

And then, once more, he read the menacing letter which had been handed to him at the Gare du Nord, when the two commanders left Odessa together! He had only read it by stealth in the train!

"Xenie would never dare to expose me!" he growled. "She evidently fears the Grand Duke, and all this is but a bit of her tiger-cat frenzy! It has grated upon her to see Marie go up to the rank of my wife! Curse her fancied scruples! It was '*bien connu*,' we would all lead a happy life—*un ménage à trois!* For she can not afford to ignore the past!" And now, he read over the hastily scrawled billet.

Its threatening words took on a new meaning!

For, in her nervous scrawl, in the hurried midnight hour, she had dashed off a few words to temporarily break off all intercourse with the man who had knelt before her in his self-abasing passion.

Xenie Karovitch had been bitter in the words—but she had veiled the truth!

She feared to meet again that blaze of contemptuous scorn in Marie's eyes!

And the crafty woman dared not ever disclose to the Duke or her rejected lover that Marie had detected the secret meeting with Wraxine—that she had been an unwitting eavesdropper!

At the station, the Chief of the line had hastily informed her of the order to prepare two cars and an engine to hurry the Grand Duke and General Wraxine away to the scene of the mutiny and peasantry fray!

"This will break off Michel's foolish passion," she had sternly muttered. "It is the way of the voluptuary. He only desires me now because the Grand Duke favors me for a brief amourette!"

And so, she had written these words, which now filled Wraxine's bosom with a grave alarm—the pre-science of some coming disaster.

"No, Michel! My answer to you is No! You broke off our past! I have long been your fond slave! I am a slave no more! This is not love, your selfish pleadings of to-night! It is cowardice! You only wish to save yourself, and to leave me helpless in your hands! But you are under my heel now! The Grand Duke is my friend—your wife is my foe! As for her, he has dragged her name in the mire for months! You have been hoodwinked, not by me, but by him! And you dare not quarrel with him—you know why! You

have been playing with fire! Go, ask who is the laugh of all the clubs of Odessa. You thrust me out of the Villa Lubormirski—you are powerless now—you can not drag me down!"

It was in the early gray of the misty morning when Colonel Tcherchinsky leaped from the carriage and dashed, alone, into the silent corridors of Villa Lubomirski.

A drowsy valet pointed silently to the door of the library. "Go in, Barin," he faltered, at last, shrinking back. "He has waited all night for you—in there!"

The stout Colonel was haggard with the wild dash of riding fifteen hundred miles as fast as the snorting iron horse could whirl along the two light carriages.

"Get there before this news reaches him!" said the heart-sick old noble, Vorontsoff. "Or else, you may find him dead by his own hand!"

And now, as the Chief of Staff laid his heavy hand on General Wraxine's shoulder, the sleeper rose up with a hoarse cry: "Where is she?"

The Colonel bowed his head silently as he extended a letter.

"Only Prince Vorontsoff dared write this to you; I can not tell you anything!"

The General of the Rovno Corps, with one glance at the old soldier's face, tore open the sealed letter.

Tcherchinsky watched him as he threw himself in a chair and slowly read the fatal lines.

A frightful spasm of rage contorted the General's face!

The purple flush of shame crimsoned his stern countenance!

How often had he laughed in his sleeve before at such a social coup de theater! The "injured husband"—the laughing stock and scorn of men!

Wraxine sprang to his feet, his voice sounding like the rattle in a dying man's throat: "They lie! They lie! It is the Grand Duke! He has taken her away to Yalta! The boy would never dare! Oh, my God!"

With a whirling fall, the great Corps Commander crashed down upon the floor, senseless, in a sudden fit of apoplexy.

And then, Serge Tcherchinsky quickly seized the letter, which had fallen on the floor! He raised his voice in a wild appeal for help.

"Here," he cried, "a half-dozen of you get him to bed! Take my carriage, Fèdor," he sharply said, seizing the valet. "Go like the wind to Surgeon-General Milanovitch! Tell him that General Wraxine is dying of a fit of apoplexy! Bring the Surgeon back here on the gallop! Wrap him up in robes! He is not to wait to dress!"

A score of frightened domestics were already busy with their master as the Colonel, stepping to the veranda, sent the sentinel on the run for the Captain of the Guard! "Saddle a couple of horses instantly!" he yelled. It was a house under the shadow of the dark angel's wing. But—the fatal letter was already safely hidden!

In five minutes, the young officer was madly racing away to notify Division-General Pauloff that he was in command of the vast cantonments in place of the stricken Chief.

"I will await your orders here," was the faithful subordinate's message.

"This is the end of his career!" sadly mourned the old Chief of Staff.

"It is Nature's revenge!" The stout soldier shuddered, for he had followed Michel Wraxine's daily life for years!

Trampling over the defenseless hearts of women—invading households—hounding down the unprotected! Now the grim harvest of shame was reaped by his own hand!

An hour later, the Surgeon-General came out of the sickroom, and curiously eyed General Pauloff and the Colonel. "Who knows aught of the cause of this?" the gray-headed man of science demanded.

"He has dropped like a steer under the pole ax!"

And the Colonel, mindful of the glance of his superior's eyes, kept silent.

"Then, General Pauloff," quietly said the Surgeon, "you must telegraph the Grand Duke Inspector-General and have a new Corps Commander appointed, for

Baron Michel Wraxine has drawn his sword for the last time!"

Before sunset, the Grand Duke, a thousand versts away, on his way to Nijni-Novgorod, read the news, with a ferocious grin of delight. "Voilà les choses très-bien arrangés!" Without a sigh, he coolly telegraphed to the Commander of the Eighth Corps at Odessa, to proceed to Rovno and assume the command!

And then, he indited an order to General Pauloff to hold the Rovno command until the arrival of the new General.

"I am on my way now back to Rovno," finished the happy Grand Duke.

And then, sending his maître d'hôtel back to St. Petersburg with a sealed letter to the Baroness Xenie, the Grand Duke had his train switched and turned, and then sped along toward the Volhynian camp, where the unfortunate Michel Wraxine lay, a broken man, hovering between insanity and death.

His Highness the Grand Duke Anatole was in an excellent good humor when he reached Moscow at midnight. For there, he found telegrams from both Prince Vorontsoff and Governor-General Tchernikoff that they would meet His Highness at Rovno, with the Corps Commander, to confer as to the necessary changes of command.

"Delicious," laughed the Grand Duke, as he opened and read a cipher telegram from Baroness Xenie Karovitch.

"Fate has relieved me from the need of relieving this bull-headed Michel Wraxine! And his illness—the breaking down of his mind—will shut off all danger of his ever betraying the secret affairs of the Neckers! I will now get the whole delicious story from these three Odessa visitors; and now, Xenie, pretty tiger puss, telegraphs me that Princess Prascovie Zastrow has reached Berlin on her way to St. Petersburg. Of course, Xenie will learn the details from the poor old Prascovie—and—these young Pilgrims of Love will soon need money!" he gayly laughed. "Through her bankers, Kalomine can easily find out the location

of the elopers! Then, for a quiet diplomatic quest! Xenie, this bright-eyed devil, shall chase them from place to place, until this satiated young Don Juan leaves Marie to her fate! *Après*," he growled, "to follow her—down to the gutter! And, as for him—I can not kill him, but, I can have him hounded as a scoundrel! The Emperor shall hear my story!"

Three days later, the whole wretched story of Wraxine's shame and Marie's wrecked life was a fevered blast through the whole camp of Rovno, and in a week every club in St. Petersburg was ringing with all the details of the miserable flight of this disgraced Pearl Queen.

And yet, though the Grand Duke put the stout Colonel on the rack of questioning, no man ever knew of the letter which the Chief of Staff had picked up from the floor.

Prince Vorontsoff, with a saddened face, simply referred the Grand Duke to the Governor-General for the history of the flitting of the yacht "Oscar," and the startled Governor-General, with true Russian acuteness, had brought along the Chief of Police. "It is the business of this man to know all which happens in Odessa," he sadly said.

A fierce thirst now burned in the Grand Duke's heart for the whole story of Marie's downfall—still a sealed book!

Michel Wraxine lay in a semi-stupor. There was no one who could tell of the hidden history of the three days after the trains had whirled Xenie Karovitch away—and the Grand Duke had hastened off with Wraxine.

"Wait—wait!" glowered the Grand Duke. "Kalmine and Xenie shall trap the Princess Prascovie! For she must know their hiding-place."

It was with a delicious sense of safety that the Grand Duke now sent off his cipher telegrams to the Necker millionaires.

"It was a narrow escape," he mused, after gazing silently on the helpless mass of flesh which remained of the proud Wraxine—a mere human hulk, with but feeble gleams of mental consciousness.

"They shall urge the new permanent Corps Commander on the Minister of War; let them take all the risks. They can safely pay my 'backsheesh' into Kalomine's hands. I can trust him—and—he can watch the sly Xenie for me! She is the last—the only one who can talk! I shall seal her mouth with gold, and rivet up her honor with a 'marriage de complaisance'!"

It was with an artful deviltry that the Grand Duke Anatole had sent his Leporello to Kalomine, with secret orders to cling closely to the Baroness Xenie.

And, therefore, it was the happy banker who hung over Baroness Xenie's gilded chair, in her loge, on the last opera night of the season.

Royally robed, insolently happy, Xenie had caught the keynote of the whole future intrigue.

In all the wild whirl of jeering gossip, neither the Grand Duke nor Madame Karovitch had been named in the clouded misery of Marie's downfall.

And so, as the Director-General kissed her hand in adieu at the Hotel de l'Europe, she whispered: "You have only to play your part, as I will mine, and—the Grand Duke is ours! But, he must think that we are only his pawns!"

They had interchanged the uttermost confidences, and Xenie laughingly nodded her assent to going out on the diplomatic quest, to trace out the fugitives. The Grand Duke was fooled to the top of his bent by the precious pair!

The lovely woman, draped in her laces, her exquisite bouquet in her hand, started back in affright as she entered her splendid salon at midnight, after waving a last kiss to Kalomine.

There was a little rendezvous for the morrow, to anticipate the arrival of the doubly hoodwinked Grand Duke.

A tall woman draped in black, rose as the hot-hearted Venus fluttered in to the flower-decked salon.

"Stay—Xenie," cried the midnight visitor, throwing back her veil. "Fear me not!"

And then, with a frightened gasp, Xenie Karovitch

murmured: "You here—Princesse Prascovie! What would you have of me?"

There were deep lines in the Princess Zastrow's noble face; her voice trembled in its anguish as she said: "I have hastened two thousand miles to hear from you the story of this horror!"

Xenie laughed bitterly. "I? What should I have to say? What have I to do with your son—a fugitive deserter! A man who has shamed his social order, outraged the Grand Duke, and betrayed the chief whose bread he broke daily! And—that woman! What should I know of her?"

The Princess surveyed the magnificence of the rooms—the brilliant splendor of the Baroness Xenie—the evident "retour de l'opera."

"Tell me what you will," she sobbed, "I shall throw myself before the Emperor; I will beg him to pardon—to aid a widowed mother!"

With artful self-protection, Xenie Karovitch hastily sketched the finale of the Odessa season—the grand Easter ball—the sudden departure of the General—her own absence.

"There is no one who can tell you any more," said Xenie.

"I have not seen General Wraxine—neither His Highness. Barbe Anykoff came away with me!"

The Princess Zastrow listened as in a horrible dream, her hopeless sorrow shining out in her splendid eyes. "It is a horror—a heartbreak—a needless sacrifice of two lives! But, I will follow them over the world till I find them!"

With a sudden realization of the mother's self-devotion, Xenie Karovitch threw her arms around the neck of the sobbing Princess and betrayed her with the Judas kiss of hypocrisy.

"Let me aid you, dearest, noble heart," she cried. "Tell me all! It has been only a mad outward pride which has kept me up! To see Helène Souvaroff's daughter go downward into the mire!"

The heartless social spy played her rôle well, for before the Baroness insisted upon her guest's stealing

some sleep and rest she had learned of the telegraphed demand of thirty thousand roubles from Malta!

"Of course, they will never dare to rest on the Continent! It is either England or—America! God help poor Marie!" murmured the Princess Prascovie.

"Some heartless treachery has driven her to this madness, and she has no shield now but my son's honor! I will never abandon her—but the hand of God is heavy on us all! And—Paul—a disgraced fugitive!"

"Tell me all," softly purred the Grand Duke's heartless spy, "and, I will share my heart with you!"

Two days later the Grand Duke laughed over Xenie's success! "The old bird will find the young birds for us! You shall follow her, you pretty witch!"

CHAPTER IX.

ON AN ALIEN SHORE.

It was merry by the lake of Pargolovo, on the July evening when the Baroness Xenie Karovitch awaited (with a secret anxiety) the return of the Princesse Prascovie Zastrow from a long voyage of discovery to Odessa and Athens.

Fortune had showered its favors thickly upon the Baroness Xenie in the three months since the disappearance of the headlong Prince Paul Zastrow.

No prettier datcha lay along the fragrant, embowered shores of the lake of Pargolovo than "Le Rossignol."

The dozen miles to Petersburg was swiftly traversed by Baroness Xenie's flying Orloffs, and her dainty steam launch on the lake was the envy of the hundred aristocrat cottagers.

There was on the whole railway line to Finland no more ravishing entourage of wooded lakes, and everywhere dreamy gardens met the eye.

The Grand Duke Anatole—the man who had remorselessly broken his word of honor to a dead sol-

dier's sister—had more than fulfilled his promise to the velvet-eyed siren.

And now, in this royal summer season, the victorious Baroness contentedly sat under her own vine and fig-tree, listening to the mellow songs of the gay-hearted students drifting by on the birch-shadowed lake; to the wild chorus of the careless soldiers sweeping out to their summer camps; to the happy laughter of children roaming in the bewitching tangles of the woods, where perfumed airs of Araby the blest floated abroad as an incense under the vivid summer sun!

There was joy in the heart of both man and maid! The islands were filled with the happy Muscovites released from Winter's icy clutches, and the season of Life and Love was on once more. Four months of a wild, happy release from the Ice King's frozen clutches!

Xenie, waiting for the return of Princesse Prascovie, was haunted by no fear of the past. For, her position was now fixed far above the tongue of gossip.

The Grand Duke had commissioned Kalomine to purchase the little jewel of a house on the Admiralty Quai, and that great noble of the blood Imperial had shown every care not to compromise his friend, Madame Karovitch.

Even Barbe Anykoff was puzzled! Her quondam friend was never seen in the Grand Duke's dangerous company; but the Winter Palace was always open to Baroness Xenie, and it was a dignified place of meeting.

And, moreover, the tongue of gossip was now busied with other choice morsels of aristocratic scandal! The "affaire Zastrow" had dropped into the soon-reached Lethe of the public forgetfulness.

Only at the military clubs, the publication of the order dropping Prince Paul Zastrow from the Imperial service, "for absence without leave," provoked a slight ripple of comment.

"Poor devil! He went a killing pace!" said Pashkof, his best friend and comrade at the Cadet School. "It was always neck or nothing with our mad Paul!"

And now, in the far-away Caucasus, the Grand Duke Anatole was making a joyous promenade militaire, his military train and court of summer guests reveling in the enchanting pleasures of the romantic land of Schamyl.

His busy mind was free from every care; for the Rovno Corps was now in splendid hands, especially as the bankers Necker had swung the Minister of War "into line," and the vast constructions were all proceeding rapidly under the charge of their secret partner and tool, the new Corps Commander!

"It was a stroke of genius," mused the Duke, "to bury all the dangerous past under General Wraxine's sudden downfall! And my tiger puss, pretty Baroness Xenie, safe in the hands of Kalomine, will seal the past in her breast! She is powerless to injure any one—for Wraxine is a mental imbecile. There is none to confirm her story! And—if she talks—" The voluptuary's face grew dark.

The saturnine noble only awaited his return to the capital to prosecute his revenge against the vanished Pearl Queen.

As for Paul Zastrow, a blacker stain than even seduction now rested on his dishonored name.

For the considerable military funds of the Secret Service, in the hands of the half-demented Wraxine, had all disappeared!

The honest old Chief of Staff bluntly said: "Paul Zastrow was the First Aid, and General Wraxine's only confidential Staff officer! It is easy to see that the man who stole Wraxine's wife away, under his very eyes, also had the wit to plunder the military Secret Service funds, to which only the Corps Commander and his First Aid had an unrestricted access."

In the face of this black scandal, Colonel Tcherchinsky was advanced to the rank of General and sent away to Turkestan.

The missing funds were dropped, as "stolen by parties unknown," in default of a proof positive.

"Delightful little witch!" sighed the Grand Duke, as he read Xenie's letters, teeming with the betrayal of Princess Prascovie Zastrow's heart confidences. "I

shall have my revenge yet—through her sprightly wit!"

And now, on this July evening, Xenie Karovitch, with a seeming tender hospitality, received the returning mother, who had made the long round of Warsaw, Rovno, Odessa, Constantinople, Athens, and even Malta. It had been a sad and bootless journey!

Driving from the station in the carriage, Xenie noted the rapid ravages of care and sorrow upon the face of the majestic woman. It only needed the bowed head, the hopeless whisper, "Nothing!" to tell the alert Xenie that the voyager's toils had all been in vain.

When the two women were at last left alone in the silence of the evening, and the servant spies all carefully shut out, Xenie Karovitch followed, step by step, the Princess's wanderings. It had been but a waste of time and money!

"Count Lazienski refuses, even now, to believe in Marie's downfall," murmured the poor Princess. "'Some sudden aberration of mind,' he said, 'for Marie Kriloff's marriage was an equally quick martyrdom. And, he would not allow me to speak to his daughter, nor Arline Potocki. 'This sorrow and shame is sacred,' he said." The fugitive wife had at least one loyal friend, even if he were only a defeated Polish agitator—a despoiled and helpless grandee.

"And then, I journeyed on to Rovno! There, in the Villa Lubomirski, poor General Wraxine wanders around, only a shattered mental wreck! In his downfall only his peasant-bred servants are faithful. But, by the Grand Duke's order, a Conservator of his property has been named. The General spends hours in writing out his resignation, drafting applications to be relieved, and then passes his weary days in waiting for the answers which never come!"

Xenie shuddered as she asked: "Do you know as to his private papers?"

"Ah!" sighed the Princess. "Honest old Tcherchinsky, by the Grand Duke's orders, gathered up every document, both in the Villa and the Headquarters at the Cercle de Noblesse. The whole rooms had been sealed by the sturdy old Chief of Staff until the

Grand Duke, in Tcherchinsky's presence, destroyed every single paper which was not the property of the Czar! And, you see, the old Colonel has gained the reward of his silence—his new grade of General!"

Xenie breathed freer. For, well she knew the dog-like devotion of the rugged Colonel to the man who had promoted him from a Sergeantcy of Cossacks.

"My letters are then safe," she sighed, "either with this old soldier of heroic mold, or else the Grand Duke!"

"And so," continued Prascovie Zastrow, "I was forced to leave Rovno without even the crowning mercy I had prayed for. For I will find Paul—I will reach this poor, deluded Marie Kriloff—if I have to search the wide world over! Had Wraxine only been in his right mind," the Princess cried, with flashing eyes, "he should have given Marie a divorce! I would have then been able to see her righted! For Paul should be made to marry her! He owes her the protection of his name, and the devotion of his whole life! And I know that she was driven into a wild despair—that she sought even in the shadow of shame—in an obscure life on alien shores—the relief from some hounding persecution." It was an alarming enthusiasm of charity—of forgiveness! The prey seemed escaping Xenie!

"And this divorce?" breathlessly whispered Xenie.

"Can not be given legally," sadly answered the Princess. "For, Michel Wraxine will never recover his mind; and here in Russia, no insane or imbecile man can be divorced! The Emperor is the only help—the last resource! But even if Michel Wraxine were sane, I should beg him to free Marie, and then only, I could save her from the fate which lowers over her—the ruin of the déclassée!"

"Have you seen the Czar?" slowly questioned Xenie, her mind working with lightning rapidity.

"Not yet!" sighed Princess Prascovie, "for I only came here to arrange my money affairs for a long absence! I shall beg for an audience next week! The Czar alone has the power to set aside the unfortunate marriage!"

Xenie's thoughts were far away, in Tiflis, with the wandering Grand Duke!

"I must have Kalomine telegraph to him!" mused the frightened intrigante. "Once free, and legally married to Prince Zastrow, Marie might tell her story, and even Paul Zastrow could unveil his knowledge of General Wraxine's dishonesty! Then, the Grand Duke would be disgraced—my future—my golden future—ruined!"

"I will aid you in your plea to the Czar, as the last of the Kriloffs and Souvaroffs; we will kneel together before him!" impulsively cried the false-hearted Xenie.

"But"—she paused and timidly asked—"did you hear any other charges against Prince Paul?"

"No!" proudly answered the Princess Prascovie. "Only his 'high-life' folly—racing, gambling, and a young officer's extravagance! His honor is unstained save by Marie's abduction! I have carefully fed money out to Paul ever since he was a Page at Court, and yet he has even now more than used up his inheritance! I have forced no accounting on him, for I had hoped that he would marry Arline Potocki, and so become rich beyond even his power to cripple an estate! But it was not to be!" she sobbed. "Count Lazienski told me that Paul was spellbound by Marie's exquisite beauty from the very first! It was a fatal day that he came to Rovno! Poor lad! The victim of a heartless Grand Duchess's fancy, he was harshly chased away from the Court to save her name. It is horrible—horrible—for Marie is doomed now to the 'half world,' unless the Czar will extend his clemency! And, I dare not even refer to the foolish infatuation of the Grand Duchess for my son!"

"And at Odessa—what did you learn?" queried Xenie, waiting to fill up her secret budget for the Grand Duke.

"No one is honest," mourned the large-hearted Princess.

"At Rovno, the whole military circle are absolutely forbidden to, in any way, discuss General Wraxine's sorrows!"

"And at Odessa, all my friends simply extended every kindness, but ignored the whole affair! And so I have traversed all Asia Minor, and the Mediterranean, only to find that no human being can positively certify to the elopement of these sadly met lovers! The poor boatman who took them on board the 'Oscar' was drowned in a storm before his evidence was legally taken. Count Lidstrom is traveling in the Pamirs, to be gone two years. This Swedish noble afterward sold the 'Oscar' at Athens, through agents, to a wealthy Greek merchant! The yacht returned from Malta to Athens, the Swedish crew was paid off there, and all sent home! There is not a trace—not a single trace—of these two desperate young hearts."

"There is but one chance left," musingly said Xenie. "Have you been at the Place Michel? There is old Elia, in charge of all the personal property of the Kriloffs!"

"Ah, yes!" said the Princess, "and poor old Elia, in terror, shut the door in my face! I spent an hour with Barbe Anykoff; and—she says that you have been so shocked by this shame that she has even feared to approach you! There has been no news of Marie at the Maison Kriloff!"

"Then," sadly said Xenie, "all is over! I have a sad duty before me. In a year, if no one claims the property in Maison Kriloff, I must legally take charge of it and protect it, for," she ominously added, "as criminal fugitives, neither Paul nor Marie can have a passport—and Marie's authority to dispose of the property would not be recognized! They are 'illegal man and woman' now—their civil state is forfeit!" The Princess started, aghast at this new blow!

"My God! It is true!" moaned Princess Prascovie. "Marie can not either hold or inherit Russian property, and Paul, as a deserter, has forfeited all! I must now search the world over—for the law will force Marie's inheritance on you—in time—but, should I die, Paul's estate (that is, what I have to leave) would be forfeit to the Crown!"

When the secretly delighted Baroness Xenie bade her guest "Good night," the whole programme was ar-

ranged for the last appeal to the Czar. "Tell me all—all," urged Xenie, "for, you will get no help save through me! Am I not the only one left to suffer with you? You must have no secrets from me now!"

Xenie had reached the door of her guest's room, when the Princess, with a last effort of self-abnegation, called her back! "I must tell you the last—the crowning—sorrow! When I have rested a little, I must humble myself at the feet of my banker, for," she faltered, "I have received triplicate drafts of my son's payable in London, drawn on me for acceptance—and on thirty days' sight! There is no place named save the engraved mark—London—but the drafts are in his handwriting. There was also a sealed note, without place or date, in which he says: 'Marie has now no shield but my honor! These drafts must be paid, even if you sell my estate interests!' And, they have been all used up in his career of folly!"

A gleam of triumph shot across Xenie Karovitch's face.

"And, you will pay them?" she breathlessly asked.

"If I can encumber my property any more," sighed the Princess. "I have ventured six hundred thousand roubles in a huge sugar mill, hoping to double our principal; the affair is as yet an experiment, but the rest of my estate—the unproductive lands—are all covered up with heavy mortgages. There is only one last resource—my jewels! They must go!"

"Say not so!" enthusiastically cried the deceitful Xenie. "Rest here! Be the mistress here! We will go to the city together, in three days; and, if your banker is obstinate, let me try my influence with the Imperial Bank. Director Kalomine has always aided me! And your banker—this money king——"

"It is I. P. Hendrickson & Co., the English agents!" frankly said the Princess.

"Then," cried Baroness Xenie, "sleep well, dear heart, and dream of victory! For, am I not at your side!"

Again the Judas kiss parted the two, while Xenie sped away to inscribe her budget of news!

"The Grand Duke will get this whole story at Mos-

cow," smiled Xenie as she closed her bulky envelope and sealed it with the personal signet given to her by her Imperial protector!

"Kalomine has my telegram now! He will be at the station at eight o'clock! It is for him to handle Prascovie's banker—he telegraphs to Tiflis for me—in a week the Grand Duke will be here, and both the audience and the money getting will be secretly controlled by us! She must tell me all, and, when she leaves on her quest, she will be easily followed—and—I can run them all to bay! Victoria!"

The tiger-hearted adventuress laughed as she thought of the law drifting the last of the Kriloff inheritance automatically into her hands by the enforced absence of the fugitive wife!

"They are both well paid off!" laughed Xenie. "Marie ignored me—Wraxine thrust me out—both are ruined; the one is a world wanderer, the other a disgraced imbecile! And now, the Grand Duke's secret revenge shall follow them on!"

In the sweet, sunny morning, Xenie Karovitch returned from her drive to the station, as fresh as the Queen of Roses.

The dignified Imperial Bank Director had kept his secret tryst, and soon was on his way back to the great Babel on the Neva.

"The drafts will drift into my hands, Xenie," he laughed. "I will see Hendrickson's agent. He will, of course, refuse to advance any moneys to her, but will protect the drafts, only, if I will advance the money to her at your special prayer. Bring her to me, after the Hendricksons refuse, and we will tie her hands! I can soon find out his whereabouts! When she goes on her Quixotic chase of these fugitives, we will send a watcher after her! Once locating the pair, then—we have the game in the toils! But, you must handle the Grand Duke! I will telegraph you his reply!"

Ten days later, Xenie Karovitch awaited, in the Grand Duke's rooms at the Winter Palace, the return of the sorrowing Princess Prascovie Zastrow from the private audience chamber of the mighty Czar.

The loyal mother had gone, dressed in gloomy black

robes, to beg the one boon which could open an honorable future to the unfortunate fugitive beauty.

Princess Prascovie's heart beat hopefully, for Director Kalomine, with a suave courtesy, had, at last, personally taken up the drafts refused by the Hendricksons and "Accepted them, for honor," with private conditions made between himself and the London agents.

Ready now, with means to depart—for she had sold half her jewels to the "benevolent" Kalomine—Prascovie Zastrow begged of her God but one mercy—the Imperial clemency of the annulment of the Wraxine marriage.

And so, before the Czar, she pleaded pitifully, while Xenie Karovitch laughed gayly with her princely lover in Anatole's own rooms.

"I will be sent for," he significantly said. "You must go into the grand audience-room, and then receive her. But, when she is gone away, followed by the man Kalomine has selected, you are free to be mine, for a week! I can come out, under the friendly shadows of the night, to Pargolovo, and give you all the directions which I do not give to Kalomine! For I have now three months of incessant activity—to visit and inspect all our middle and southern camps! Kalomine has my cipher—he has my carte blanche! You are to go at once to where the runaways are. You shall have your maid, my maître d'hôtel as your courier, and a private letter of credence from me to our Ministers, agents, and consuls! You will be a secret attaché of the Foreign Office!"

"And my work?" smilingly demanded Xenie.

"Only," said the unpitying voluptuary, "to blast her character; to penetrate her nom de voyage, and proclaim loudly everywhere her shame! On your cablegram to Kalomine—he has my orders—the nearest Russian official will formally notify her to return to Russia, or else forfeit her citizenship, her rank, rights, succession, and all civil state. As for Paul Zastrow—he is already a declared outlaw. If he touches Russian soil there is waiting for him—Siberia and—a felon's grave!"

The Grand Duke hastened away at a summons from the Imperial Cabinet, after clasping Xenie Karovitch in his sinewy arms.

"I have my spies watching her. The moment that she leaves, I will come to you. Kalomine will telegraph! Remember, you are to write to her to keep her heart open to you, and when you meet her abroad—if you do—you are to be friends with her, and yet, spread Marie Kriloff's disgrace skillfully! For, I do not care to have Prascovie Zastrow see my hand in this! It is the Emperor himself who will deal the final blow!"

It was ten minutes after the Baroness Xenie had glided into the audience-room when the Princess Prascovie Zastrow tottered out of the Private Cabinet.

She sank into her betrayer's arms in an agony of hopeless tears!

"Lost, lost, my God!" she sobbed.

And, leaning forward, breathlessly asked Xenie: "The Czar?"

"His Majesty listened kindly to my plea—he heard my whole prayer as to the divorce—and—then rang a bell! In a few minutes the Grand Duke Anatole entered. Taking a package of papers from his nephew, the Czar said, coldly: 'I would separate this woman from the unfortunate General Wraxine—for her sake alone, and to ease your noble, motherly heart—but here is the record of your son—the proofs of the theft of the missing funds of the military chest! Your unfortunate son added theft to the dishonor of betraying his General's wife. And, it is our Imperial will that both the fugitives shall remain excluded from Russia!'"

Prascovie Zastrow's breast was shaken with a storm of sobs!

"I knelt before him, crying: 'My son—a thief! Never!' And then, the Czar himself raised me and aided me to depart! His last words were: 'Come to me for yourself—I respect your motherly sorrow! But for them—the wages of sin is death! They are Russians no longer!'"

When Xenie Karovitch had conveyed the sorrow-stricken woman back to the villa by the lake, she marveled over the somber energy of her guest. "My pass-

ports will be made out for a year's absence and viséd to-morrow. I take to-morrow night's train for Berlin and London!"

"What! You leave Russia?" cried Xenie, in a seeming agitation.

"Forever, unless Paul rights the wrong he has done—and—unless he can disprove the foul lie of his being the robber of the military funds!"

It was the dignified Alexandre Kalomine who escorted the stately Princess to the train on the next evening, and rode with the sorrowing woman beyond Gatschina to cheer her on her way.

With brotherly kindness, he presented one of the under bank officials—a messenger going to Berlin upon a secret financial affairs! "He will have every care of you!" said the false friend. And so, followed by traitor and spy, the brave-hearted, gray-haired mother set out upon her journey to find the disgraced young paladin, whose life ruin had been wrought by the roving eyes of a bold-hearted Grand Duchess!

There was light and life, love, and happy laughter in Xenie's beautiful cottage home by the lake on this night. For the Grand Duke had stolen into "Le Rossignol," and, leaning in ecstasy over Xenie's beautiful shoulders, watched her jeweled fingers straying over the piano's keys while she sang as sweetly as ever any full-throated Russian nightingale! And, that concert was heard far down in Hell!

And when the week of stolen love had been dreamed away, and the Grand Duke was forced away to the field, both the noble and his serpent spy knew that the Princess Prascovie had sailed from Southampton for New York City.

And, on the same vessel, skulking in the steerage, was the spy whom Kalomine had sent on to Berlin, only to make sure of the Princess's every movement.

And yet, a fierce storm of anger, mingled with sudden terrors, swept over the Baroness Xenie's heart! Her golden fortunes were imperiled, for a lion had been loosened upon her pathway!

It was a story of the spy sent back from Berlin which made her shiver with new and unknown fears!

Too well she knew all the devilish malignity of the Grand Duke, the stern severity of the Czar, and the unshrinking bravery of the high-souled Princess Prascovie.

Her golden fortunes were trembling now in the balance.

And the frightened woman hastened to call Alexandre Kalomine to her side.

For there had suddenly risen up an avenger of the plundered Marie Kriloff, the lovely orphan who had been hounded with remorselessness and had madly thrown her life away.

And the next day, while the Baroness Xenie and Kalomine plotted the final destruction of the fugitive wife, the Intendant and Xenie's maid were busied in the preparations for the lady's sudden journey abroad.

"This is a serious matter, Xenie," concluded Kalomine. "And yet, we have time to act, and so close up all our lines! I will escort you as far as Alexandrovo, and then, make a flying visit to the Grand Duke, finding him en route between the camps; for not a line—not a spoken word—must be risked to compromise us! The stout-hearted Princess Prascovie will be in New York City long before you can sail! If Prince Paul and Marie are really in America, they are safe there from everything, save his mad extravagance, and the lassitude of satiety growing up between them, with the inevitable hand of misfortune! Paul will soon squander everything within reach—and we must now crush them all! Their last resource is the Princess, and I can soon cripple her! Mark me, you will never hear from her! For the mask is off—she knows you now as her bitterest enemy, and sees the Grand Duke as he is," whispered Kalomine. Besides, she has fathomed the secret of Wraxine's money business."

"And, what must I do now?" demanded Xenie.

"Your part is easy," smiled the banker; "only to follow on leisurely, and to act as directed by me. My secret agent—Anton Mertvod—will leave all his reports for you at the Russian Consulate General, in New York City. There you can find his address, and safe-

ly call him to you. It is no longer a campaign of violence! It needs but the fine hand now! And all your letters of direction from the Grand Duke and myself you will receive at the Consulate; for, you know, neither Paul nor Marie dare even communicate with them, and the Princess Prascovie will surely avoid that gossipping official! For, she now fears the Grand Duke. And you will be safe, as your letters will go and come in the sealed Government bag to the Consulate General in New York City. But it is truly a dangerous juncture! We must now crush the Princess to separate Paul and Marie! After that—misery and shame will soon drag the women both down!"

"And Paul?" anxiously cried Xenie.

"Let him go to the devil in his own way!" growled Kalomine. "He is as heartless as a Kurd, and the slave of his wild passions—pleasure, riotous living—and the next pretty face will do the work!" Xenie smiled a wicked smile! For, her lover had only told the truth!

"I told you that we should have crushed Weinstock while he was in your power!" accusingly said Xenie.

"Remember, Duischka, that if we had openly punished him for his robberies," calmly replied the banker, "you would never had Marie helpless on your hands; for the two hundred thousand roubles would have gone to her—Wraxine never would have had his bride—you would have never gained your influence over the Grand Duke! No! Marie had her value! She was your trump card! The game is made! And now, the useless pack can be thrown away! Moreover, Weinstock could have easily betrayed the secret operations of the Imperial Bank—of the Neckers—and all our great financiers here, if we had pushed him to the wall. His offense was usury only, and for that alone, we could not kill him, or even send him to Siberia! The Jews are too powerful—their hidden cabals have wound shameful bonds around our greatest men! The whole Jewish money world would have revenged itself!"

"And now, with this new dangerous intelligence—with all the secrets of the Grand Duke's speculations

in his power—free, at Berlin—can you not ‘remove’ him—in some safe way?” Xenie Karovitch’s agitated face showed the lust of murder. “ You will not let him disgrace me forever!”

There were tears in the siren’s eyes; for she dreaded the stern rage of Princess Prascovie.

“ To be published as a thief—to be degraded at Court—to lose the Grand Duke’s favor”—the woman’s reflections showed her the abyss before her!

“ Ah! Foolish Little One,” laughed Kalomine, drawing her toward him. “ To use violence toward Matthias Weinstock would be worse than a crime—it would be a mistake! No! I shall, after explaining all to the Grand Duke, run on to Berlin and ask Matthias Weinstock to dine with me! He is a Hebrew—and purchasable! He shall be placed on the list of ‘Secret Agents,’ under my own orders! We will buy him—and—so—own him! The Grand Duke must order it—and—sanction it! As Inspector-General he can use Weinstock—as a foreign agent! No! Xenie! We will stuff his mouth with good green roubles! And then, you and I, dearest, hold the Grand Duke’s honor between us! He fears the Rovno frauds being discovered! I hold all his private life in my hand—as his secret financial agent—you hold the dangerous secret history of the Rovno Corps contracts! And now, Golubtchik, when you return you shall marry me—at once! With the Grand Duke as the Père d’honneur, we are above even the Czar’s resentment! There is but one weak spot in our armor—Barbe Anykoff! Does she know anything?”

“ Nothing but the story of my little past amourettes,’ blushed Xenie; “ and, I hold her own, as a fair counterpoise.”

“ Then,” laughed Kalomine, “ you are certainly safe! For, she is a veritable man eater!”

It was a strange story, this spy’s report! The Princess Prascovie, followed to the Hotel Bristol, in Berlin, by the spy, rested on her journey, while waiting the replies to her letters to London; for the bankers there, alone, held the secret of Paul’s whereabouts.

Anton Mertvod—the spy—had well played his part,

and he eagerly watched the long hours of conference of the anxious mother with Matthias Weinstock, the fugitive lawyer, now a Bourse runner and money agent in Berlin.

The spy had escorted Princess Prascovie to Dover, and his winning sympathy had drawn out the whole story from Princess Zastrow's surcharged heart.

Her rage at the discovery of Xenie's perfidy, the cruel theft of Marie's birthright, the two hundred thousand roubles recovered from the money-lenders, had all given Matthias Weinstock the hope of that bitter revenge for which he thirsted. And yet, neither the exiled lawyer nor the Princess dreamed of the great banker, Kalomine's, complicity!

Liberal-hearted Prascovie had crossed Matthias Weinstock's palm with five thousand roubles of her little fund, gained by the sale of half her splendid jewels.

And this had brought her the news which gladdened her soul! For the crafty Weinstock's brain was filled with every detail of the life at Rovno and Odessa.

When Michel Wraxine fell, like an oak uprooted in the storm, no one noted, in the hurry of the arrival of the new Corps Commander, the gliding away of Casimir Kinsky, the sly maître d'hôtel who had ministered for years to General Wraxine's pleasures and aided his daring amours!

None but the perfidious, smooth-tongued Pole knew that the watchful Wraxine had left the funds which disappeared stored in the strong boxes of the private Headquarters, at the Cercle de Noblesse, in Rovno.

While the honest old Chief of Staff hung over the helpless invalid, the artful Polish bodyservant had gathered up, in Villa Lubomirski and the vacant bachelor Headquarters, all Wraxine's jewels and valuables.

Possessed of his master's keys, he had hastily rifled the funds and secreted them before the slow-witted Colonel Tcherchinsky began his search for the papers.

The rugged old Colonel only thought of that which might compromise the stricken man, while the sly servant paid himself for the long years of pandering to Wraxine's secret vices.

Casimir Kinsky had, in twenty years, wormed himself into his master's heart life! He was the necessary "famulus" who knew of all the secret conferences of the Grand Duke and Wraxine; of the division of the spoil between the agents of Necker and the corrupt General; of the secret dalliance of Xenie and Wraxine, in betrayal of the marriage with Marie.

And, with sleepless eyes, he had watched, in Wraxine's absence at Odessa, the Grand Duke's stealthy approaches to the unprotected wife.

With all the deep dissimulation of the Pole, the scoundrel had veiled himself to all eyes!

And too well he knew that his dangerous secrets would cost him his life in Russia, should the fiery Grand Duke Anatole, or the Necker cormorants, ever learn of his betrayal. Flight was his only safeguard!

Casimir Kinsky had easily gained the Austrian frontier at Kudzilov, only fifty miles from Rovno, and he was safe in Lemberg, long before his departure from the Villa Lubomirski had been noted!

And though he had no passport, a hundred roubles paid to one of the Polish frontier agents had smuggled him safely out of Holy Russia.

With fear and trembling, he avoided changing any bulk of his stolen money at the frontier.

There was the telegraph! He might be apprehended and returned, perhaps, to die under the knout in Siberia.

It was to Berlin, the great money-center, that he hastened, and in looking around for a safe agent, found the wary Matthias Weinstock as the manager of a great money-broker, on the Unter den Linden.

Kinsky had easily recognized Weinstock, for in General Wraxine's money-borrowing days, many times the smooth usurer had been privately ushered into Wraxine's sleeping-room by the confidential valet.

Two sly rogues had played hide and seek for a week.

The absconding Kinsky had no papers, and, so changing a few thousand roubles, he bought the passport of a dead Russian from Matthias Weinstock, for this same worthy hung around the great Friedrich-

strasse Bahnhof to prey upon all classes of Russians in that great omnium gatherum.

Only after a week of dinners and sly conferences, had Kinsky prevailed upon Weinstock to change the whole stolen hoard of paper roubles into good, red, German gold.

It had needed an adroit agent to separate the paper and break it up between twenty banks, for the supposed theft of the missing military funds by Prince Paul Zastrow had set all the "agents de change" on the *qui vive*, to aid the Russian secret service in the arrest of Zastrow.

A ten per cent. bonus paid to Matthias Weinstock had effected the transfer, and when Kinsky left Berlin, he carried away a lifetime fortune in good German and French gold, and in Bank of England notes, French billets de Banque de Franc, and German paper.

In vain, the adroit Weinstock tried to get a draft into Casimir Kinsky's hands! The sly Pole was too adroit, and now, the stolen paper roubles had only passed through the Jew's hands.

And Matthias Weinstock had only told the truth, when, with tears in his eyes, he refused Princess Prascovie's offer of five thousand roubles more, nearly the whole remainder of her ready cash, to disclose the hiding place of the astute Casimir Kinsky.

The wily Jew had been outwitted by the sly Polish thief—both of them fond of woman's smile, Kinsky had begged Weinstock to arrange a little *carte blanche* dinner, for four, at the choicest restaurant of the Grünwald.

And it was so plausible—the timid Pole desired to hide from the thronging Russian spies in Berlin.

He would join the feast after Matthias Weinstock had conveyed their fair companions out to the restaurant.

And, at last, the bright-eyed divinities of the Bal d'Amour, on the Pragerstrasse, had forced the anxious Weinstock to serve the splendid dinner!

Every moment he anxiously waited for the arrival of Kinsky—even up to midnight—but, he fell back in his

chair, speechless, when the Oberkellner handed him an envelope.

The dancing girls gayly seized upon the two hundred mark bills, which fell on the floor, as Weinstock read the few words:

"Here is the price of the dinner. Thanks for busying yourself all afternoon and evening with the ladies. I was on the quickest express train long before you left your office this morning. Don't try to follow me! The world is wide! As for the Russian dogs—neither old Wraxine, if he recovers his wits, nor the Grand Duke, nor even the Neckers, dare to punish me! I know too much, but—do swidanya—you'll never see me again!"

"And, now, Xenie," said Director-General Kalomine, "you see the Prince Zastrow can not be punished for the theft. There is no proof against him, but he is sacrificed by his military desertion. This Pole could not be punished. There is only a lying Jew's tale to incriminate him, and he will never reappear in Europe. But, I will make Matthias Weinstock my tool. He shall be my sword of Damocles hanging over the Grand Duke's head. And, the Czar shall pay him well! The Princess Prascovie can do nothing! She has no proof, but in a year, I will crush the whole three, simply to protect ourselves, and, to save the Grand Duke!"

"You must!" cried Xenie. "We must destroy the Zastrows and Marie—the white-faced fool! Remember the Czar's sudden furies—his outraged honesty! There is the Black Sea fleet scandal—it pulled down one Grand Duke; the American adventuress and the diamond thefts sent another Grand Duke to a nameless grave in disgrace! If the Czar should unearth this Rovno jobbery, then Grand Duke Anatole's fall would drag us down!"

"You are right," said Kalomine, his face suddenly paling. "We might feed the rats in the underground dungeon of the fortress! But, as long as you and I are true to each other—as long as I keep Matthias Weinstock alive and out of Russia, we are the secret rulers of the Grand Duke! You must follow Anton Mertvod on

to America; you must travel incognito; spare no money; you shall swim in gold, but locate the two women, and then follow my orders! Paul is doomed with his dissipations, but we must dispose of the Princess Prascovie and the wayward Marie. I fear but one—it is the brave Princess—for," gravely said Kalomine, "the Czar Alexandre is honest, and he would listen to her! She must never return to Russia!"

"How can you prevent that?" faltered Xenie, gazing at Kalomine's fierce eyes.

"She must be ruined, and Mertvod and this Jew lawyer must alarm the Grand Duke! He can have her passport canceled; he can have all our foreign officers ordered to refuse her a legal visa!"

"And, on what pretext?" cried the puzzled Xenie.

"On the pretense of living abroad in luxury, with her spendthrift son, on the proceeds of the theft of the military chest!"

"You are a genius!" cried Xenie, throwing her arms around him; "and, I now promise you," her words were smothered in passionate kisses, "that I will marry you on my return, and together, we will reign over the Grand Duke!"

It was a month later when the "Touraine" swept up the splendid expanse of the bay of New York, and Madame la Baronne Xenie Karovitch laughingly bade adieu to her cavaliers de voyage.

The beautiful Russian had been the toast of the voyage and a living mystery. Even the jaded "fashionables" of the American set wondered whether the "Baroness Anna Milanoff" was en route to queen it at Washington, the city of Mexico, Pekin, or Tokio! They only knew that the lady was "on a diplomatic quest"; that her personal fascinations were gracefully self-evident; that she had her grave-faced Intendant, her maid, and page in her train, and that she was "très adroite" in keeping her own secrets and extracting those of others!

Not one of the sighing swains knew whither "la belle Russe" was driven, when the Russian Consul General, with magic influence, passed her through the custom's lines.

Sighs and fond heart throbs followed her as she laughingly waved adieu to her "amants de voyage," but, the lady was acutely interested that night at the Hotel Buckingham when Anton Mertvod waited upon Madame Xenie with her letters and cablegrams, and made his first report.

"Prince Paul Zastrow is here, mingling in the gay world under his own name. He is plunging madly into every dissipation, and he has already pawned all Madame Wraxine's jewels. As for the Princess Prascovie and the General's fugitive wife, the one landed and disappeared, and the other is hidden away. My orders only were to set all the Russians whom I could find on the track and lead away the reckless Paul! You will have to find the ladies!"

"Good," cried the excited Xenie. "With the mask of my mother's name to shield me, and the help of the Russian priest, I will soon find Marie Kriloff, for she was always a devotee! But, the Princess Prascovie in hiding? This is dangerous!"

CHAPTER X.

EXPIATION.

Three days after the arrival of the Baroness Xenie upon the hospitable shores of Manhattan Island, a stately, middle-aged woman, clad in black, turning out of Broadway, paced slowly down a side street to the quaint purlieus of Gramercy Park.

The gloomy silence of the sleepy old Park was peculiarly depressing on this stifling, dusky August evening.

The sultry day's heat seemed to cling to the very pavements, and even the nightfall had brought no relief.

Policeman Clancy, trifling on a corner, lazily watched the aimless movements of the lonely promenader.

"One of them there reduced gentlewomen," mused

the stalwart policeman. "They comes here to dream over them old times, when their rich grandfathers owned the earth!"

The bluecoat knew but too well the faded grandeurs of the historic old Gramercy Farm. He was familiar with the decayed gentlemen and bookish old men who sadly took the air in the aristocratic reservation clamped between the vulgarity of Third Avenue, the shabby-genteel barriers of Fourth Avenue, and laced in between cross streets now given up to boarding-houses of ephemeral duration and plaintive discomfort.

It is a place where many poignant sorrows are carried locked up in the bosoms of lonely promenaders; and the Princess Prascovie Zastrow was heavy hearted as she made the circuit of the square garden thrice, lost in her battle with present cares and unavailing past regrets.

A brave, pathetic, lonely figure—this solitary, middle-aged woman—the mother who had crossed the wide Atlantic to stand by the fugitive wife, whose only shield was her son's honor.

High minded and truthful to others, steadfast and loyal in her own noble heart, this Russian mother, Prascovie Zastrow, hesitated now before facing the woman around whom, darker shadows than those of night were now closing fast.

As a bell chimed the hour of nine, the Princess sighed and then slowly walked up the steps of the one old mansion-house in the Park, which had been surreptitiously "opened" as a "refined boarding establishment"!

The tide of disaster which is sweeping away the "old families"—the key-bearing aristocrats of the Park, the "owners"—had some years before carried out into the breakers of poverty, the forgotten Knickerbocker who had fondly builded his family home, sacred to him and his heirs forever.

And a hawk-eyed relict of a departed Gothamite now mingled surface politeness and underlying cupidity in her reign over the "guests," founded upon a deep, rocky stratum of eternal curiosity.

And so, when the door was opened to Madame Zas-

trow, with a frosty smile, the Cerberus allowed "the strange Russian lady" to at once mount, "au second," to the apartment of "the other Russian lady."

The transparent fiction of this "refined home," as to the "guests" being anxious to share "all the comforts of a home" through gregarious social sympathies, was violated in the case of the pale, stately beauty who opened her "parlor" door on this night to the Princess Prascovie Zastrow.

For, the silent Marie Wraxine was an enigma—an unanswered riddle—even to Mrs. Euphrosyne Daniels, the alert "proprietress," who had, up to this juncture, untied every Gordian social knot presented to her by the ebb and flow of her "guests."

The beautiful woman who occupied the one handsome rear room, second floor, with its alcove bedroom, adroitly flung out over an old conservatory, locked her secrets in her gentle bosom! The suspicious circumstance of her one luxury of a private service had been forgotten in the two months of her residence.

And, as neither visits, letters, telegrams, signs of extravagance, or any other marks of a double life, were marked up against the "Russian lady," she was adjudged to be either suffering the monopoly of a great sorrow, or enjoying the distinction of continued ill-health.

And so, Mrs. Euphrosyne Daniels was forced to "possess her soul" in a fretful inertia of wonderment.

On this August evening, two persons shared the great sorrow which had been but dimly discovered—and yet correctly diagnosed.

For, when the door was securely locked, Marie Wraxine threw herself impulsively upon Princess Prascovie's bosom.

"Paul?" she cried.

"No news, my own darling," sadly answered the heartsick mother. "He is, as usual, with his friends!"

And, then and there, Prascovie Zastrow thanked God that the lonely woman, whose yearning eyes now dumbly questioned her, could neither speak nor read the English language.

It was in their own beloved Russian tongue that the sharers of a living sorrow exchanged their griefs ; and, for prudential reasons, no French or German newspapers were available to the woman who had left a princely luxury to be swept by fate into this gloomy “second floor back” of the furtively conducted “aristocratic boarding-house.”

Marie knew now but one blessing—the daily presence of the gallant-souled woman who had cheerfully taken a vacant sleeping-room above (a case of Hobson’s choice), and now, shared the modest ménage with the fugitive wife.

An hour later, Marie Wraxine had sobbed herself to sleep, and the Princess Prascovie sat by her side, tenderly holding the thinned white hand which she dared not drop, for fear of wakening the uneasy sleeper. There were no flashing diamonds on the slender fingers now, and—alas—there was no golden wedding ring, either, as a mark of the condition of wifehood.

Princess Prascovie’s firm, earnest face was carved with deep wrinkles now, and sudden streakings of gray hair lent to her middle years, the added dignity of care and sorrow.

A man in her rugged honesty—a woman in her delicate tenderness—Prascovie Zastrow looked down in yearning love upon the lonely sleeper.

There was still the thrilling beauty of Marie’s lovely face ; the exquisite symmetry of her molded form ; but the cheeks were all too pale, the eyes were sunken in sorrow, and thin, blue veins plaintively marked the wasted temples.

“I dare not tell her—I can not break her dream of love !” murmured Prascovie, as the sleeper stirred, but only to murmur “Paul,” with a smile parting her delicate lips.

There were tears of tenderness in the Princess’ kindly eyes as she murmured : “I must take her away from here, else she will die—an alien here ! For, when she learns the sad, sad truth, as learn it finally, she must, it will kill her ! And where ! Oh ! My God ! Where is there a haven for her !”

The four months since the fatal morning when the "Oscar's" flitting silver sails had gleamed on the blue Odessa Bay had changed the stately Pearl Queen into a wistful, trembling woman—a moral coward—one who dared not look back upon her path, and before whom the shadows and darkness were now gathered.

Prascovie Zastrow's lofty soul revolted at all these mean shams—the cowardly lies of the four weeks since she had first stepped upon this unfriendly alien shore.

Stealing off the steamer, the mother, with just forebodings, forebore to use her own name or station.

She had not needed to use prudence in searching out Paul, her wild, spendthrift son; for, all the journals of Vanity Fair were now harking upon his lurid path.

It had been easy for her to find out from the bankers his club address as the "Cosmopolitan."

And, while the mother, modestly registered as "Madame Prascovitch," at the Bayadere Hotel, a safely distant mercantile hostelry, breathlessly waited for her son, Prince Paul Zastrow was on a far-away yacht, skimming the waves of Long Island Sound, himself the "preux chevalier" of the gay party on the "Columbus."

Bitter hearted, the mother sought out the bankers, and, thanks to her excellent English, was soon enabled to discover Marie's whereabouts.

"I believe that the Prince has no friends here," slowly said the banker, after gazing at his visitor's dignified face, "except his cousin, Madame Olga Zacharoff, who resides at Mrs. Daniels's, Gramercy Park."

And so, before Paul Zastrow had returned from his gay yachting cruise, the Princess Zastrow had clasped Marie in her arms.

She dared not tell the helpless woman of the added disgrace now blackening Paul's name, but she listened, heavy hearted, to the story of their unhappy flight!

And, before Paul had glazed over his two months of dissipation in New York, the Princess knew where Marie Wraxine's jewels had gone!

"The old, old story!" faltered Prascovie that night, as she wept alone in her straitened room at the Bayadere. "It is the beginning of the end!"

She could look back twenty-five years to the mad profusion of Paul's reckless father—the wild, proud-hearted Boyar, who had gambled away whole villages, sacrificed vast forests, squandered her own dowry, and poured out the wine of his life right and left among the riotous crew of High Life—from the Neva to Nice, and from the Derby race days on Epsom Downs to the wild gambling nights of Yalta.

And, when Paul, with a lowering brow, at last had welcomed her; when she had heard all his new fantastic projects; his easily vamped up self-acquittal; his stormy social splendors in this great human hive of New York, she saw, at once, that Paul had deliberately sacrificed Marie Wraxine, an offering to his love of himself!

His first demand was for money, his second word, a stern command that his mother should style herself Madame Zacharoff during her stay in New York—during her American wanderings. For her life must be made a lie to fit his own reckless social arrangements, so as to hide Marie's identity.

The mother's eyes were blinded with tears as she listened to the young roué's specious pleadings.

"It was forced on me," he gloomily said. "I could not allow Marie to use her own name. She has no legal papers! It would be madness to use her real name. There are Russian officials here—the Consul-General and his staff, the Priest and others; there is the Legation at Washington; a lot of officers here watching the building of war vessels, and many army men and officials are always passing around the world! To protect her, she is supposed to be my cousin—Madame Olga Zacharoff—and—you—must be Madame Zacharoff! It is done simply to conceal her shame."

"Her shame?" echoed the heartbroken mother.

"To protect her, then—*à la fin*"—cried the excited Paul. "I could not set her up here as my wife, for a dozen men here know me. I am in the best society—I have my plans—there are always openings—and—she is safe where she is! I can not marry her—while Wraxine lives! You know that he never would give her a divorce—and—all that I owe him is a meeting

on the field of honor! I can do no more!" desperately cried the fugitive soldier. It was the coward and bully's position!

It was long after midnight when Paul Zastrow knew the black record left stretching out behind him—all the ignominy of the alleged theft—the fatal sacrifice of his citizenship—his noble rank—and his powerlessness to defend his honor.

The mother watched him as he strode wolfishly up and down the room; his graceful, manly beauty was now at its zenith; his form supple and elegant; his dark eyes mournfully tender; his face as bright and brave as the Archangel's, and his voice soft, low, and heart-reaching.

To the exquisite refinement of the patrician, he added all the aplomb of the guardsman, and the easy carriage of the reckless, magnificent Russian noble! Prince Charming, par excellence!

Stunned and shaken at heart, the mother, an adept in the cold game of Life, saw clearly that the despairing devotion of Marie Wraxine had, for return, only the calm sufferance of this victorious Don Juan.

It was not from the lonely woman in Gramercy Park that the Princess drew out the story of sated passion; of the broken charm; of the wearying weight of the lightly borne chain of love, now heavier than forged steel.

For, self-devoted and heroic, the unhappy Marie had given herself over, heart, soul, and life, to this same tender-eyed Prince Charming.

Purposeless and vain, Paul Zastrow, on flimsy pretexts, had easily fled away, after his mother's arrival, to the pleasures of the gilded world around him.

With a shudder, the Princess Zastrow looked back at the wretched Marie's two months' virtual imprisonment.

For, stealing out, veiled, to meet her indifferent lover, she had only snatched a few hours every week in his company.

And, now that the first month of her American life had passed, Prascovie Zastrow knew that her son had given himself over to every mad riot of the giddy

American pleasure seekers, who had opened their arms to the Prince Paul Zastrow. For there was a glamour in his title of Prince—a real Prince—a charming Prince! On this night, when the helpless Marie lay dreaming under her friend's eyes, the lofty-minded Princess saw the gulf which already separated the two rash fugitives, for Marie's only daily safe pilgrimage was to the Russian church, where the Princess feared to accompany her, for fear of being recognized and exposing their joint shame. And now, the sad-hearted mother knew her son to be light-minded, reckless, heartless, faithless, and already unfaithful, even in sin, to the woman who had laid down her lofty rank and dragged her soul in the mire to please his mere fancy of an hour!

"My God! what a punishment—what a soul sacrifice!" the wretched mother faltered. "There is no way back into Paradise—there is no reparation possible here below—no rebuilding of the desecrated altar!" And she, who had sacrificed all her fortune for the young ravisher, knew, too, that Paul Zastrow was false to her—to his mother—to the woman who had given him life.

And, ignorant still of the inner tragedy of the lonely orphan's life; all unconscious of the conspiracy which had thrust her forth—soul naked—to be the scorn and plaything of men, Princess Prascovie Zastrow fell on her knees by that lonely bedside and prayed for help to the God of the fatherless.

"He shall marry her—he must walk the path of honor—and yet, I must take her away! For, there is now the slow, daily, eating sorrow in her eyes which at last brings madness into the haunted brain."

Her own coming had forced upon Paul Zastrow a certain perfunctory courtesy—for, he could now come and visit the "aunt" and her niece, without loosening the poisoned arrows of slander upon the woman whom he had led away into the cold shadows of the "half world."

And—when the sunlight came again to wake Marie Wraxine from the cheating reprieve of dreams—Paul Zastrow, honey-voiced and sweetly smiling, came, with

love in his eyes and all his lying glamour, to plead at his mother's side.

There were but two thousand roubles left of Prascovie's hard-won traveling funds when Paul went forth lightly with the moiety which he had gained by his specious tale of a "golden opportunity."

The fates were kind to the two women who now hung on his every movement; for neither of them ever knew, when he returned with gloomy brow after three days, that the harpies set on his track by Xenie Karovitch were laughing over their easy victory at play!

For, it had been easy for Kalomine's woman spy to pick up Paul's glittering trail in "high life"; and so, with a cool malignity, she set the spoilers on him, to lead him on, on the Dance of Death!

And, in her easy luxury, she laughed gayly, while Anton Mertvod was hastening back to St. Petersburg to take up again the duties of spy and agent de police.

Crouching on Paul's path, the Baroness Xenie only waited the hour to give Marie over to the machinations of the Russian Consul.

"He has hidden her," laughed Xenie, "and—perhaps under old Princess Prascovie's care! But, given a week, and I will find her—for, if she is alive, she is not far from this same Prince Charming."

There was an astonishing surprise in store for Prince Paul Zastrow when he roughly demanded further moneys from the mother on whose saddened face he now saw the signs of evident distrust.

"I have no more money left, Paul! You have thrown away fifty thousand roubles in four months! Are you mad?"

The answer was an oath, and the last threat was one which left the mother alone, trembling in helpless sorrow.

"You have your jewels—sell them! I must have money—or, we must part! I leave her fate in your hands!"

The gentle-eyed, dark-robed woman, whom none knew save as a graceful stranger, was kneeling in the Russian chapel—far away—when Paul brought out his renewed brutal demands for money.

And so, it was with simple long sufferance and an ignorance of her lover's treachery that Marie strove to comfort the agonized mother, who now saw the jaws of Fate closing upon the helpless woman—branded an outcast by her madly born love.

But, a stranger in a strange land, and dependent upon the money-lenders in her own country, the Princess dared not tell Marie of the iron poverty looming up before her!

"Heedless, unfaithful, a gambler, a desperate egotist, Paul will soon cast her off to starve! There is but one chance left! I have yet the means to save her!"

And then, throwing her arms around Marie, she murmured: "We must go away, my poor child! This is a false martyrdom—only a soul murder for you! I must be free to throw myself down before the Emperor and beg Paul's pardon! You shall be free when I have cleared Paul's name! I will find you a safe shelter in South Germany. I will trace out this Casimir Kinsky! I will clear Paul's honor—and—he must marry you! But, you must leave him now! You must go away with me! For his sake—for your sake—for my sake!"

And then, Prascovie Zastrow started, as Marie's head fell like a lily beaten down by the storm.

"It is too late! I dare not! I can not leave him now! For God's sake—spare me this! You do not know what you ask!"

And, seeing the agony upon her face, the Princess forebore to press the sorrows of that proud and breaking heart; for well she knew, now, that Marie Wraxine felt within her own heart that she was but a helpless burden to the man who had dragg'd her down.

There was a smile of astonished gratitude on the face of Father Agapeo Honcharanko as he listened, that afternoon, to the musical voice of the disguised Baroness Xenie Karovitch.

The Russian priest's modest dwelling had never been illumined by such grace and elegance.

The bearded pastor tried in vain to read the beauty of the smiling face hidden by that doubled, filmy Circassian veil.

There was the ring of a fervent gratitude in his voice as he accepted a thousand roubles as an offering to the church.

"We are poor here, my daughter," the Greek ecclesiastic said. "The Czar nobly pays half the expenses of church and pastorate; but we must soon have a larger church and a more fitting priestly residence. Here, on the East Side, surrounded with Jews and struggling foreigners, we are not in a dignified home! You have seen the chapel!"

And then, in broken accents, Xenie told of her journey—her haste—and promised him a visit on her return, and a further donation.

She sighed as she drew out a photograph.

"Even my cousin, whom I have never met, I have lost in the whirl of this great city. There are family papers to deliver—and I am forced to leave them here with the Consul."

The priest's eyes lightened as he gazed on Marie Wraxine's pictured face.

"Thank God that I can aid you in your quest," he said. "This lady has been here nearly three months. It is Madame Olga Zacharoff, is it not? I only know that she is alone—and she lives in Gramercy Park! She has been in the confessional in the last month. I only know her name from the sacristan, but she comes daily to pray in the chapel at three o'clock. And so, you can meet her! Shall I bear your message?"

Baroness Xenie kneeled devoutly. "Give me your blessing, Father! Say nothing of my visit! On my return, in a month, I will come to you, in the confessional. I do not wish to surprise her. I hasten to the Consulate to obtain the papers!"

Father Agapeo sighed as the beautiful woman hastened away. He had even forgotten to ask her name—he had not seen that veiled face—but, all he knew was that she was young, and her bearing was that of the aristocracy.

"Alas! Only the children of poverty come to me!" he mused, and then—kept his counsel, for he saw, glittering before him, another present.

When the dark-robed Marie stole into the church

that afternoon, she threw herself down before the altar in an agony of grief!

She saw no help as she gazed, through her tears, at the holy icon. There was a living secret now, which she had guarded, in a sudden terror, and she shuddered at the kind insistence of the Princess Prascovie.

And, while the mother of her lover, left in the lonely rooms, steeled her heart for decisive action, the pale woman on her knees could not hide the crushing truth from herself!

She alone knew under what cowardly pretense the reckless Paul had abandoned her to her silent sorrows! She felt that she was a mere burden upon the once chivalric lover!

But, Prascovie Zastrow saw the gulf of misery opening before the helpless, fugitive wife.

In her happier days—in the time when her own dead husband, Prince Zastrow, was the head of the Russian Embassy in London—Prascovie had become an adept in the English language. And, as she read now all the leading journals, she could follow easily the course of her son's unbridled gayeties.

The casting to the winds of fifty thousand roubles; the ignoble sale of Marie's jewels, to bear him up in his dissipations, and the last gambling episode, had unveiled the brutal heartlessness of her reckless son.

Paul had basely abandoned the woman who waited for him all these weary hours, to plunge into the follies of the lazy New York parvenues who worshiped his princely title.

Prascovie had easily recognized Paul's social sponsor—a déclassé social Russian renegade—a young noble who had been chased out of Russia, and even warned away from the hell of Monte Carlo!

Parasite, roué, and card sharper, this was the Leporello who led Paul Zastrow into circles where his handsome face and soft, wooing voice carried him into the inner coterie of a band of light-minded women voluptuaries.

And then, the broken-down adventurer reaped his harvest in steering the pleasure-mad Paul into the open

man-traps—club, race-track, poolroom, gambling den, and the lurid night life of New York!

It had been Paul's first excuse that he could only protect Marie by a veiled tenderness, in her respectable hiding-place! But now, the prodigal was lancè!

He had laughed to scorn his mother's anxiety as to the stolen funds!

"The funds were locked up at Rovno," he boldly said. "I was at Odessa. There is no proof—and so, nothing to answer! Qui s'excuse—s'accuse!"

And now, Paul had sullenly fled the consequences of his last gambling bout, at Long Branch, where he had been fleeced, his traitor companion pocketing his private share!

With a sad heart, Princess Prascovie sought the steamship offices to secure a passage for herself and Marie! "Two weeks more, and we would be left here stranded; Paul's life is wrecked, and—he shall not drag her down to the pauper burying-ground!"

It was while Princess Prascovie was absent, energetically making her plans for departure, that Marie Wraxine slowly walked homeward to the quiet prison of her lonely rooms!

And—feeble and fluttering hearted—she carried a voiceless grief in her distracted heart!

For there was that which forbade her—the voice of an awakened Nature—from leaving Paul now—her last spar on Life's dreary ocean!

And so, she never saw the lounging spy who followed her to the "refined home" of Mrs. Euphrosyne Daniels!

But, an hour later, with gleaming eyes, the Baroness Xenie left the Russian Consulate-General, on the Battery, and was swiftly driven homeward!

She had tracked Marie Wraxine at last to her innocent hiding-place.

"Now!" she grimly laughed, "the wolf will never leave her trail—till she is run to earth at last! And, the story of her shame will soon drive her far away from this cold-hearted roysterer; for, Paul will only wallow in his pleasures, and never leave this whirlpool!"

The private agents of the Consul-General had given him a full report of the meteoric social rise of the Prince Paul Zastrow, and now, under the bidding of a master far away on the Neva, the callous official was ready to act!

Xenie, a thirst for vengeance in her heart, waited at her hotel for the falling of the blow which was to bring Marie Wraxine down to the level of the lowest. A fugitive wife—a fallen star—an unwedded mother soon to be!

The two women whose destiny now hung upon Paul Zastrow's mad career, had dined in a brooding silence.

Marie, with a new hopelessness in her eyes, feared to unbosom her soul of the secret which appalled her.

And, the steady eyes of Prascovie Zastrow followed her in silent pity!

"My God! I can not tell her of Paul's heartlessness—of his unfaithfulness even to his honor as a lover! When we are out at sea, I can tell her enough to warn her! And, to the last, I can save her from the trampling feet of the meaner crowd! But, Paul shall be made to play his part! Her heart must not break too soon!"

The Princess Prascovie had, with infinite difficulty, conveyed a stern message to her reckless son, as he sat deep in a gambling game at the club, where, by a last ruinous sale of his own ornaments and jewels, he was playing for his last stake, where credit would avail him for a few days, if the luck should turn against him!

He had quickly understood his mother's imperative warning, and had promised to meet her at the Hoffman House at eight o'clock.

To be forced to a private interview, with Marie absent, told him that he was in some danger of losing the only friend left to him on earth.

"I must have more money—and so—I must meet her," he growled, as he grasped his cards and plunged once more into the game.

And so, when the Princess walked down Broadway to meet the sullen gambler, Marie was left alone, not daring to read her own thoughts, but intuitively feeling that the parting hour was close upon her!

With a startled surprise, she bowed her head in assent when the servant clumsily announced a visitor. "The gentleman must see you at once," the attendant said. "He comes from Prince Zastrow."

The trap had been neatly set by the crafty Xenie!

And then, Marie Wraxine stood tranced in wonder, her hands crossed upon her bosom, as a stern-faced man of middle age followed the servant into the room.

She could see little behind his bushy beard and gleaming spectacles; but his voice was gravely courteous, and he bowed, as the frightened woman pointed to a seat.

Drawing a bulky envelope from his breast-pocket, the visitor said, slowly: "I regret, Madame, to announce myself as Dimitri Kostrominsky—His Imperial Russian Majesty's Consul-General."

And now it was only a pale, tortured woman who listened as he placed the sealed packet in her hands.

"I will be very brief, Madame," the official said. "I can not disguise from you that you have taken the gravest responsibility upon yourself in coming here—a Russian subject—under the name of Madame Olga Zacharoff! Alas! Madame, the papers which I give you are addressed to Madame la Générale Marie Wraxine!"

And then the helpless woman uttered a low cry and pressed her hand upon her wildly beating heart.

The very walls seemed to whirl around her!

"I will do no more than my duty! These papers are an official summons for you to return to Russia—to obey the laws and the duties of your station; failing in which, I am ordered to notify you that you lose all rank, rights, property, and future privileges, as the wife of Michel Wraxine, General in the Imperial service—and as the sole heiress of Demetrius Kriloff and Hélène Souvaroff! I am ready to make every arrangement for your instant return to Russia—in a manner suited to your rank! It is the Imperial order which I communicate, and a sealed copy is now at the Embassy in Washington. Failing in your obedience, you will be publicly proclaimed in all our official stations in Amer-

ica as a fugitive without papers, and a woman traveling under false names."

Marie had started to her feet, and now, with an appealing glance, she pointed to the door.

"In mercy, leave me!" she murmured, in Russian.

"God help you, my poor child!" muttered the Consul-General, as he turned at the door to see her standing there, with the last agony of a lost life upon her beautiful face. He was a father, and—had a daughter yet to face the world!

An hour later, Prascovie Zastrow led the sullen Paul into the apartment where the woman who had queenied it among the Rovno roses lay helpless upon the couch to which she had staggered!

The open door had alarmed the Princess! Springing to Marie's side, the distracted mother cried: "Thank God! She still lives!"

And then, picking up the envelope with its ominous blue seals, she turned upon her son! "Here is the harvest of your work! She is discovered, and the Czar's spies have run her down!"

Paul Zastrow dumbly gazed at the superscription on the envelope, and then, muttering a frightful curse, hurled it across the room.

But, Marie Wraxine, with her feeble hands shading her tear-stained eyes, piteously wailed: "Take me away—anywhere—out of the sight of men—out of the open shame of this social prison!"

And, while the wretched women mingled their tears, Paul Zastrow doggedly kept his eyes on the floor! "This is my final ruin," he growled. "They must both leave—at once!"

The brutal egoist's heart only answered to the call of self-interest! "It will be better that both of them are out of the way—but, who the devil has been here!"

At a sign from his mother, the gambler left the room.

"Come back—in half an hour," the Princess cried, with a glance at Paul which stirred even his cowardly heart.

And then, on Prascovie's bosom, the sobbing woman told of her relentless visitor. Prascovie watched her

breathlessly until, with a sigh of agony, the deserted orphan threw her arms around her friend's neck and whispered the story of her crowning distress!

For, the mystery of Love had unfolded, only to bring to Marie Wraxine the last seal of a sinful woman's martyrdom!

"Paul must give me his name, now," she sobbed, "for the sake of his unborn child!"

It was late when Paul Zastrow dared to look upon the face of the pallid woman moaning there in all the torturing unrest of her conscience-haunted dreams.

The reckless man was sobered, for a moment, by his mother's stunning disclosure.

For the agonized Princess Prascovie had awaited the spendthrift's return before the street door, and then led him over to the gloom of Gramercy Park.

Paul Zastrow dared not lie when his gallant-hearted mother clutched his arm. "Tell me, if there is a spark of honor left in your craven heart, did you lead this poor woman away, or did she throw herself madly at you—dogged by that brute Wraxine and that painted devil Xenie?"

"It was my own doing," doggedly said Paul. "I could not help it! I loved her from the moment I met her! And—I believe that I was mad that night, when the Swede loaned me his yacht! And now, I am tied hand and foot! You see that they dare not openly attack me! I know too much of Wraxine's administration! But, I am powerless to protect her! She will be now exposed to every insult here! And, you must take her away—at any cost—at all hazards!"

"Listen," said Prascovie Zastrow. "You dare not return to the Continent: they would arrest or assassinate you! If Wraxine were a sane man—if you could fight him—you might clear your honor as a soldier; but—the missing funds stamp you—my son—as an accused thief!"

"If the brute would only die," growled Paul Zastrow, whose blood boiled in impotent rage. "There is but one way—I shall remain here—and become an American citizen! Then, I can boldly return to the Continent—later! If Wraxine, or any of her family,

choose to call me out—that is all I can do—to meet them! As for the funds, you must make terms with this Matthias Weinstock! If you can not reach Kinsky, you can at least get Weinstock's deposition that Kinsky himself stole the funds!"

There was a brooding silence as the mother made her last appeal!

"Will you remain here to be a beggar—a gambler—a living lie! I shall sail Wednesday with this poor betrayed orphan! I will know the whole story of her ruin yet! Fool as you are, you were only a catspaw of fate!"

Paul Zastrow threw his head up in desperation.

"Give me a thousand dollars, and I will leave the Atlantic coast. There is the West—there is California!"

"I have only money enough to take Marie and myself over to Dresden," pleaded the Princess.

"You have your jewels," muttered the craven, as he bowed his head in shame. "Come with me!" fiercely cried Prascovie. And the spendthrift shuddered as he saw her stern face in the glimmering light on the stairway.

It was only when the mother laid her cool hand on Marie Wraxine's brow that the suffering woman opened her tired eyes.

"Paul?" she gasped.

"Yes! Paul!" solemnly said the Princess, her form stretched to its imposing height.

"He leaves here to-morrow night—and—we sail for Havre the next day! I will never leave you, Marie, while I have life or a crust!"

Paul was awed as his mother grasped his wrist!

"Kneel down here!" she commanded!

And the ruined gambler dropped as if he were shot!

"Swear to me that you will marry this woman the very moment that she is free—as soon as the mercy of God relieves her from her husband by death!"

"Why?" faltered the spendthrift.

"To give your name to her unborn, fatherless child!" said the Princess, folding the pallid girl in her loving arms.

And then, in a storm of self-reproach, Paul Zastrow swore before high Heaven to do his mother's bidding!

"Come back and say farewell to her, to-morrow. Keep faith with her to the last!" said Prascovie, as she hurried Paul to the door.

"I will get the money which you need—you shall have more from Dresden! And, you are to leave first! If you do not go West to-morrow night, you will lose your last chance on earth to remain my son!"

And then, as Prince Zastrow hurried away, goaded on by the last sight of the fainting sufferer, Princess Prascovie sadly went back to her silent vigil of love.

Next day, the old Wall Street banker sighed as he dropped Princess Prascovie's magnificent diamond cross—an Emperor's gift—into the drawer of his private safe.

"Pardon me," he muttered, "this two thousand dollars does not go to your son—does it? For, Madame, there is not money enough in New York City for that wild young man's follies! And, the set he goes with would beggar a Rothschild—if they had their own way!"

He read the truth in the Princess's hopeless eyes! It was a mother's last sacrifice of love.

"One thousand takes him West, the other takes me homeward," she frankly answered. "He leaves to-night, to begin a new life—beyond the Mississippi!"

"God grant it!" cried the old financier. "You can command me in anything!"

Through her tears, Prascovie Zastrow only asked one simple Christian boon!

"If I write you about him, tell me the whole truth!" she said, as she wrote down her private address.

The old man bowed his head, in a solemn promise—and, when he raised it, the gallant woman was gone! "God go with you!" muttered the man of dollars. "Brave motherly heart!"

That night, at seven, Princess Prascovie parted with her son in the hurry of the great depot at Forty-second Street.

Paul Zastrow was haunted by the vision of a white, despairing face as his mother whispered her last words.

"As you deal with her, may God deal with you! Your honor is her only shield now! You owed your life to me. Swear to me, now, that you will give your unborn child a name!"

And Zastrow, in an agony of remorse, kissed his mother's trembling hands and swore his solemn oath; then he sprang into the train—for this parting had at least showed him his own coward self—naked and ashamed, vile before God and man.

The next night, on the steamer, Prascovie Zastrow sat with the silent Marie and sadly watched the shores of the alien land recede, and drop down into the cold, gray sea-line!

And, looking forward to the east, she could only see there the gathering clouds of sorrow and despair; for the inexorable Fates had decreed that the paying of the price should begin!

BOOK III.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

CHAPTER XI.

ALONE IN DRESDEN.

The fast-receding snow was only faintly streaking the shaded gullies around Berlin, when the Princess Zastrow descended from a closed carriage at the bank and exchange office of Meyer, Unterwalder & Co.

The chill winds of a late spring howled down the Unter den Linden.

And the sturdy Berlin burghers were still wrapped in their winter furs as they bewailed an Easter without blossoms.

The busy clerks of the money mart failed not to notice the commanding air of distinction of the tall, veiled stranger who asked an interview with Herr Matthias Weinstock, the new Manager.

"If the Excellence will only send in her name!" said a dapper, budding financier, springing eagerly to the side of the Princess Prascovie.

With a quick decision, the visitor traced a name on a scrap of paper.

"One of those crazy Russian princesses," muttered young Möller, vainly trying to decipher the Muscovite characters.

But, he was surprised at the air of sudden excitement with which the now mighty manager sprang up, and received his visitor at the door.

"Come back for a letter of instructions, in five minutes," he whispered; and the astute Möller then knew the import of the manager's wink.

There was an air of financial solidity in the renegade lawyer's new private office; an air of efflorescent

prosperity in his soberly rich dress, which told the watchful Princess Prascovie of the crafty Weinstock's substantial promotion.

"Autres temps—autres mœurs"—mused the noble woman, as the patronizing tone of Weinstock's discourse smote harshly upon her ear.

"You are not looking well, Princess," frankly said Weinstock, gazing at her with an inward satisfaction.

"Thanks for your discernment, Sir," frostily remarked Madame Zastrow. "It has been a hard winter."

"And so, you are returning to Russia from your American trip?" briskly demanded Weinstock. But he regretted the slip of his tongue.

His Hebrew curiosity had led him on in advance of the text.

"I am returning from England, and passing through Berlin," coldly remarked the Princess. "But, I desired to see you with regard to this fugitive thief, Casimir Kinsky—the man of whom you spoke to me last year!"

Weinstock started, and rang his bell. "Excuse me, my dear Madame," he said; "the demands of our large business are always unceasing!" And then, he handed a hasty scrawl to the young man who had ushered in his unexpected visitor.

It took but five minutes of conversational fencing for Matthias Weinstock to find out that he had met his match in craft.

"Perhaps, as you are so busy," simply said Madame Zastrow, "you can meet me at the Hotel Savoy, this evening at seven, and dine with me. We can then talk over the whole affair."

Wreathed in smiles, the alert Manager bowed Madame Zastrow to his door, after eagerly accepting her invitation.

It was only a quarter of an hour after she had departed that he gave vent to a growl of dissatisfaction, as young Möller reported: "The lady had dismissed her carriage on entering. She walked rapidly to the Passage, and there disappeared—for there are a hundred ways to dodge out of that!"

"Never mind!" cheerfully ruminated the Hebrew, "to-night, she will not escape me!"

There was no air of concealment in the manner of the head porter of the Hotel Savoy that evening, when he dispatched Herr Matthias Weinstock, in charge of a faultless Oberkellner, into one of the pretty private dining-rooms of the open hotel court.

And, after dining, the Princess Zastrow, with an unfailing courtesy, discussed the later news of St. Petersburg with her wary guest!

Before the hostess had lighted her cigarette, she had learned of the wonderful success at Court of Madame la Baronne Xenie Karovitch; and also, of the continued imbecility of the unfortunate General Wraxine.

There were many preliminary topics discussed before the Princess Zastrow at last frankly approached the topic of the fugitive Kinsky.

And, after all, the plausible and graceful denials of Matthias Weinstock availed nothing. His crafty face was slightly flushed as he said: "You have been some time absent from Europe, Excellence. You may not know that Casimir Kinsky has been pardoned by the Czar for his flight, leaving Russia without a passport, and has returned to Poland, where he has purchased an estate."

"And, upon what grounds?" cried Prascovie Zastrow, her eyes blazing. "It is infamous; the Emperor shall know the whole story from me!"

"Upon the grounds, Madame, that as confidential valet and maître d'hôtel of the demented General Wraxine, he has been able to clear up many matters of vital importance to the Government. The Grand Duke Anatole, as Inspector-General, received many valuable papers from Kinsky which, it appears, were preserved to the Government by his prudently crossing the frontier! A ring of unscrupulous scoundrels surrounded General Wraxine, who has been pardoned all his own misdeeds on consideration of his splendid past services and his failing intellect."

The Princess Zastrow sprang to her feet and paced the room like a caged tigress.

"Since you are so well informed, Sir," she sharply

cried, "as you were once the family lawyer, do you know of the fate of Marie Kriloff's inheritance?—for I will call her Marie Wraxine no longer!"

"Alas!" sighed the astute Weinstock. "You know the fury of the Emperor as to the family relation! Excellence Madame la Générale Marie Wraxine has been publicly declared a 'forfeited heir' as to the property left in St. Petersburg, and has lost all her rights in the Maison Kriloff! And her citizenship is also declared annulled; her passport has been vacated—'for contumacy in refusing to return to Russia upon the legal demand of the Russian Consul-General in New York City. But, of what use to fence further! You were there—and the St. Petersburg papers published the whole report! I can get you a copy!"

Prascovie Zastrow trembled like a leaf in the storm.

"And, to whom did the spoils go?" she fiercely cried.

"Ah! The law forced Madame Karovitch to accept the inheritance!" suavely replied the promoted broker.

Princess Zastrow paused in front of Weinstock, and gave him a glance which made him quail.

"And now, as to my son! Falsely accused of stealing the funds of the military chest?"

For the first time, the burly Jew showed the vulgarity of his nature. "Casimir Kinsky is now an Excellence—he has bought out an old fief! He has filed his written deposition that your son stole all the confidential funds of the military chest, and that he only protected a few thousands of roubles of the General's funds, which he has returned with the papers!"

The Princess seized him by both hands. "You can swear that he confessed the theft to you—that you changed the money! Your deposition will save my son's honor! He can, then, return to Russia!"

But, Matthias Weinstock shook her off boldly!

"Of what avail would my oath be! To a man who is a deserter, under hue and cry—a man who dare not return to Russia for fear of being flogged to death by the regimental 'drummers'! No! Not if you gave me a hundred thousand roubles! Kinsky seems to have many friends in high place! He may have only

followed your fugitive son to trace out the hiding-place of the light-minded thing whom he stole away from General Wraxine! For the whole world knows that the Grand Duke enjoyed her! The shame has broken poor old General Wraxine's heart—and—neither your son nor the wanton can ever return to Russia!"

The Princess stepped back slowly, as the burly brute, gaining strength from his own unrebuked insults, now found words to express his lurking triumph.

A light broke in upon her brain!

She opened the door, and raised a wasted hand. Her lips moved in one final curse—the awful condemnation of a soul to deepest hell! "Go—mouchard!" she cried. "I know you now! Judas!"

When Prascovie Zastrow raised her head, she was alone.

"Poor Marie!" she muttered, through her falling tears.

"Left alone—friendless, poor, and with neither name nor honor! God help the helpless one—and her helpless little babe!"

The sudden call to action came. Touching the silver bell, she called the Head Porter: "I must see your master at once. Take me to him!"

Even in her agony of grief, the Princess had suddenly recalled the fact that many years ago her dead husband had made the fortune of the now wealthy proprietor when he was a stranger on the Neva, left stranded by the death of the Prussian Ambassador whose household the young man managed.

And now, the bread cast upon the waters returned.

The cautious Berliner led the agitated woman to his own splendid apartment.

"It is a short story, Excellence, but, one that I must whisper to you! This Weinstock—in a year—from a mere agent de change, has leaped up to be second partner in a solid private bank! That he is the principal local agent of the Russian secret police; that he conducts the confidential secret affairs of the Russian Imperial Bank; that he is all-powerful in their hidden villainy—all this is true. And—you now know the reason of his sudden rise in sober money circles! I

have to know the truth! Great personages come here—and—Weinstock is their slimy shadow, their dangerous tool; and a fellow named Kinsky, a bogus Polish nobleman, is their border agent, and often comes here to confer with Weinstock!

"And so, this low brute is spy, stool pigeon, and secret agent!"

In an hour, the Princess Zastrow had vanished from the Hotel Savoy, and even Weinstock's spies were baffled.

For, no carriage but that of the proprietor had left the court.

While the baffled Weinstock was berating his subordinates, the Princess, muffled up beyond possible recognition, had caught the train for Hanover. And the loyal old hotel-keeper, then, whispered: "Change at Stendal; you can so reach Dresden easily, then going by Magdeburg! Command me here--in life and death!"

Matthias Weinstock cursed his unlucky star as he, at last, gave up the search over all Berlin.

"If I could only have found out her real abode! I might then have traced out the secret of Marie Kriloff's hiding-place! For that, the Grand Duke would have paid me with ready gold—and an aristocratic golden order. But ,the old she-fox has been too sly! She feared me from the first!"

It was a night of agony and alarm for the widowed Princess—this enforced detour by Stendal and Magdeburg, to reach Dresden.

At last, she realized the full extent of Marie Wraxine's downfall and the world-wide degradation of her son.

Her own flight from Berlin had been most skillfully managed, and but too well she knew that she dared not re-enter Russia while her enemies were in power, nor be openly seen in Berlin.

Spirited and high souled, Prascovie Zastrow never dreamed of the mighty money cabal of the Neckers, supplemented secretly by the crafty Kalomine—now reaping all the golden perquisites of the huge constructions at Rovno.

To sustain poor, old, imbecile Wraxine's blasted reputation, his illness had been a most fortuitous happening.

And the whole corrupt circle had craftily shunted all the confusion and disaster of the Rovno Corps upon the fatherless aid-de-camp who had stolen his General's wife—his private accounts—the vast sums held personally by Wraxine and now successfully defied extradition in the United States—the refuge of every unpunished scoundrel!

In the years of her diplomatic residence in London Prascovie Zastrow had learned every dark secret of the Russian police system, and she knew well the weight of the Czar's arm!

But one thought now animated her! To provide for the safety of the woman who, alone in Dresden, was the guardian of the helpless babe, at once a miracle of Love and a badge of shame!

The last sneer of Weinstock—now the unveiled “mouchard”—told her of Marie's danger! “The Grand Duke never enjoyed her!” proudly cried the motherly woman. “He drove her mad with his secret pursuit, and, in a moment of desperation, she listened to Paul's insane pleadings—the voice of his mad love, born of ungratified passion and self-adulation.

“Myself! Safe only in Switzerland,” mused the undaunted Princess. “And I must soon say farewell to Marie and the helpless baby Paul, who fills her days and nights with a sweet anguish! But, if I am recognized at Dresden—if I am followed—then, this poor girl will be soon ‘marked down,’ and—my God!—she might even disappear! There is now the need of a friend—a true friend! Where shall I find him?”

And the devoted woman prayed to her God to raise up that true friend to the husbandless and fatherless woman who now meekly bowed under her innocent cross—the sweet babe born in the shadow of sin and sorrow!

With a pang which rent her heart, Prascovie shuddered to recall her son's silence! He had never even answered the letter which told him of the sacred bond now tying him to Marie Kriloff for eternity—the union

of heart, soul, and body in the mystery of creation—the fatherhood of a man to be—the last pledge of the inner souls of two passionate mortals!

But the Princess had read of certain festivities of the “Golden Horde” by the far Pacific—of “various notable happenings,” in which the name of “the gallant and accomplished Prince Paul Zastrow, of the Imperial Guard,” flourished in the gilded annals of “High Life.”

“His oath—his oath!”—there was the last flimsy barrier between Paul Zastrow and the Seventh Hell of Dante’s Inferno.

It was in the bright, fresh glow of the early morning that the Magdeburg train stopped in an enchanted valley in the environs of Dresden, and the guard, with muttered apologies, showed an elderly passenger into the first-class compartment which the Princess Prascovie had bought as a “reserve” for a few marks “trink geld.”

They were half way to Dresden when the Princess, turning from her corner at a sudden shriek of the whistle, saw a face which called back her happiest years! “It is the Princess Zastrow,” cried Father Anastasius Petroffsky, throwing back a great, gray capote, to show the black robe, long hair, sweeping beard, and jeweled pectoral cross of the Russian priest.

“Time has changed me sadly!” murmured the stately lady, studying the matured face of the once young man whom she had left an assistant priest—a rosy neophyte—at the Russian Embassy in London.

“We both have known sorrows, gracious Protectress,” murmured the man of forty, whose pallid face told of the midnight oil.

“Whither journey you?” cried Princess Prascovie, with a sudden impulse.

“I am the resident priest of the Russian chapel in Dresden,” said Anastasius, “and—I lay my life at your feet. Can I serve you?”

The train was already rolling into the Berliner Bahnhof, when the Princess seized his hands.

“I am alone in the world! My gallant husband is dead! I have no son now! You have heard?”

The bearded priest bowed his head in a sad silence.

"Take me to your home—I wish to make my confession!"

With a quick motion, she swathed her face in impenetrable veils, and they swiftly threaded the crowd on the platform to where the line of carriages waited in the Altstadt. Here was an humble friend, raised up by the providence of God to aid her—one whom even the Czar dared not strike down. For the Russian priest is sacred!

Two hours later, Father Petroffsky, in his full robes, awaited an arrival at the door of the baptistry of the chapel adjoining his sheltered home.

It was his good wife who aided a slender, graceful woman to alight from a closed carriage.

When the shrouding cloak was thrown aside, Marie Wraxine stood, with tear-filled eyes, her loving arms clutching to her breast the last frail spar to which she clung on the ocean of Life!

An infinite yearning love and tenderness filled Prascovie Zastrow's eyes as she took the helpless infant in her arms.

The rich, full voice of the priest rang out in the solemn chants of the Greek Orthodox Church! "The name," he murmured.

"Paul Michaelovitch," answered the Princess Zastrow, as a convulsive shudder ran through Marie Wraxine's frame.

"There is no godfather," whispered the priest's simple-minded wife.

"God is the father of us all!" solemnly said Anastasius Petroffsky, as he took the babe in his arms.

"I shall inscribe my own name, if I may have the honor."

With a straining heart, the fugitive wife watched the maimed baptismal rites of the patrician-born infant, and then tottered away to the welcome shelter of the good priest's humble home.

And, while Kazia Petroffsky laid the helpless little waif upon her motherly bosom, Prascovie Zastrow told Marie of the coming parting which was even now weighing upon her heavy heart!

"It is God's will, my dear child, that we should part—for your sake—for the sake of the dear babe—that I may protect you! I go from here to Zurich, and shall take shelter at Geneva, in the shadow of God's undefiled Alps—Liberty's last unprofaned asylum in the eastern world! Father Petroffsky is godfather, with me as godmother, to little Paul. I shall send him my letters—my remittances—for you! He knows all now, for I have made my full confession! Do you the same, my poor heart-wrung child; and the same God who will guard me on my lonely way, will defend you and your babe! Petroffsky knows little Paul's one heritage—my son's oath! And, now, give me a half an hour with him alone. Father Anastasius will take me to the station. He will shelter you here, after you can safely leave the Klinik, until I can have him bring you over to the Swiss border! For I have a long journey to take; but one other faithful friend is left to me, besides this man of God! For, I dare not write to Russia now, or go there, or abandon you! But, I can send one who will save for me the wreck of my fortune. Then, dearest heart, you shall come to me in free Switzerland!"

With a convulsive energy, Marie Kriloff clung to the stout-hearted Princess, until Father Anastasius broke in upon their loving farewell.

"It is the only way, my poor child," he whispered, making a sign to the Princess Prascovie that the carriage was at the door.

"Here in my household you are safe from all intrusion; we have the royal Saxon privileges for the chapel and my residence. Kazia is but a poor priest's wife, and yet a tower of strength to you; for she is a mother and bears a true Russian heart—warm, loving, and tender. All that you have to tell me, you can tell under the seal of confession, and then—not even the Czar can share the secret of your sorrows; as for your safety—there is no foot which dares to cross my humble threshold!"

"And you will tell her, later, why I must go, Father Anastasius, that she may have peace?" sobbed the Princess, as she stole out to take a last farewell of the innocent child, now smiling up at Kazia Petroffsky.

"May God deal with him—my only son—as he deals with you!" sighed the steadfast woman, as she whispered a few words in the good housewife's ear.

"Marie is a child—the child of sorrows—a helpless victim of a code that kills—the inhumanity of man to helpless womanhood! And so, be kind to her when I am away! I will never forget you—and God will bless you!"

"Barina," murmured Kazia, "Anastasius has told me of all your golden kindness to him, in the days of his friendless youth! We will return it here—to this helpless one—God's own innocent! Poor babe!"

"It will be two weeks before you hear from me, darling," murmured the Princess. "I shall be watched, even in Geneva; and they must never know your hiding-place. Father Anastasius will send all the letters on to Paris, and mine will be forwarded, by one faithful friend there."

When the carriage started, Marie, standing at the window with her babe on her breast, could only see the veiled form of her brave defender; but Prascovie Zastrow's eyes filled with bitter tears to see the helpless, white-faced woman there alone, with the helpless child clasped to her breast. The Queen of Pearls no longer—the Queen of Sorrows now, wrecked, abandoned, poor—and alone!

It was late at night before the priest returned, for he had gone down the railway a few stations on the road toward Prague; and he breathed freer when the devoted woman was safely over the Austrian line.

He knew now all the nobility of Prascovie Zastrow's loyal soul.

And when, in the shadows of the Sachsen-Schwyz, they parted, he felt how noble was the atonement of the hopeless mother for a coming sorrow.

"I see no hope," murmured Father Anastasius. "The General may live on for years, as a mental wreck; but, there is no divorce possible, and, as the child is born in wedlock, the law presumes it to be his own! Should the General at any time recover, he can take the child away from her."

"And that, alone, would kill her," sadly faltered Princess Prascovie.

"Your son is young, heedless, a man of the world. He may forget—he may even marry!" slowly said the priest, taking her hands.

"Spare me—spare me!" cried the Princess. "Should that occur, for God's sake let her live on in ignorance! For that would be her death doom!"

"He writes?" said the good man.

"Alas, no! Only to me—for money!" faltered Princess Prascovie, her tears blinding her. "I feared some fatal imprudence! He does not even know where she is now!"

"I shall send you a certified copy of the baptismal certificate of the child! It is my duty!" gravely said Petroffsky. "And you can then send it on to him! Should General Wraxine die, your son owes it to high Heaven to make this one atonement! He can then adopt and legalize the child, whether he marries the mother or not."

When the two parted, Father Petroffsky kissed the generous hand which had given him, for the support of Marie, the last thousand-rouble bill left of her hard-won remittances.

"I shall soon place a sum with you to protect her and the infant—all that I can raise, as soon as I can communicate safely with my agents in Russia; and I only ask that you and your wife will send me a joint receipt for that sum, to be used for the maintenance of Marie and her child! She will then know that it is in your hands!"

When the priest blessed his innocent, kneeling penitent, Prascovie Zastrow smiled sadly her farewell.

"May God guard and bless you," she simply said. "I feel strange forebodings—I have suffered with the heart for long years! I am not as strong as I was, and if you should ever hear aught of a sudden seizure, let me then have your thoughts and your prayers! I will leave all my papers in a safe place, to be delivered to you—for her—and for the child!"

They had not dared to ask each other what should be done if Prince Paul Zastrow should come to the

Elbe to claim the woman whom he had dragged down from her high estate.

The good priest shook his head sadly as he wandered up the sloping hillsides of the Altstadt.

"He will never come—the young Prince! No! He will never turn his head backward to see the wreck he leaves behind! It is the martyrdom of a noble heart! God help this wretched mother!"

And now, began the long labor of Love which dignified the modest home of the Russian priest.

For, as the long summer days drifted on, there was always the one answer, "Nothing!" to the inquiring eyes of the pale-faced Marie, who watched little Paul growing to be a sturdy and rosy infant.

One care only was spared to the priest and his wife. The second story of their home had been given up to Madame Marie, her child, and a rosy-faced Saxon girl, who adored her pale and silent mistress.

There was no intrusion either of spy or gossip, and the peaceful days of their silent visitor were passed in reading, writing, or else devoted to the child.

On the midnight hours of the soft summer nights, Father Petroffsky or the good Kazia went abroad with the silent mother, whose pale face only flushed with delight in driving through the beautiful, deserted gardens.

Regularly, each week, came the pacquet of letters from Paris, forwarded safely from Geneva, but the priest's heart told him that the letters for which she craved were not as yet forthcoming.

It had been but a month after Princess Prascovie's departure when the sum of five thousand roubles was remitted from Paris, to be used as a fund for the maintenance of the helpless pair.

And Father Anastasius knew of the health and well-being of the Princess Prascovie at Geneva.

There was a strict injunction to carefully oversee all the Russian newspapers which duly arrived at the Russian chapel, and, especially, to destroy all those painting the glories of the marriage of the Baroness Xenie Karovitch with the Chevalier Alexandre Kalomine, Director-General of the Imperial Bank!

With a sigh, Father Anastasius read all these histories of this social splendor, and shuddered to think of the future fate of his silent charge.

"Everything lost to her—name, rank, friends; her property forfeit, her child fatherless—her future one long-drawn agony. God help her! She is now paying the price!" mused the priest.

He knew too well the unanswered question of her eyes—the longing to hear from the brilliant social refugee in America.

Too well, from her monthly confession, did the priest know all the brooding sorrows of that patient heart; and he sorrowed in silence, to know that even the devoted mother at Geneva knew not where Paul Zastrow's reckless feet had led him on.

It was by a sudden fancy of his own that Anastasius Petroffsky wrote to a seminary friend whose name he saw as an official incumbent of the Russian chapel at San Francisco, Cal.

And his ingenuity was at last but too sadly rewarded!

For, after some weeks he knew the whole story of Zastrow's meteoric career.

Wild dissipations in eastern cities, a desperate duel on the Mississippi, a social intrigue of wide notoriety, and then a career of frenzied speculation on the western mining bourses.

There was a bundle of newspaper articles, all glowing with lurid details of the mad Prince Zastrow's conscienceless exploits!

With jealous care, the good ecclesiastic hid these far away from possible sight of anyone, not even daring to hint of their existence to the Princess in his regular weekly letters.

"No! He never will come!" sadly sighed the priest. "There is no hope that he will ever give a second thought to the woman whose child is now a helpless hostage of God's infinite goodness!"

It was in the late fall, and the linden trees of Loschwitz were bare once more, the long line of barges going home up the winding river for the winter, when the

peace of the little rectory was disturbed by a sudden summons of the priest to Geneva.

Anastasius Petroffsky gazed long and sadly in Marie Wraxine's hopeless eyes, as he watched little Paul beginning to totter around manfully on his chubby feet.

"I can tell you nothing, my dear, child," he said—"only—that I will hide nothing from you—on my return! Here are the lines—'Come to me at once.' And I have promised the Princess that I would always come at her summons!"

It exhausted all Father Petroffsky's moral authority to restrain his excited guest.

"We are in God's hands, my dear child," he firmly said. "If you are needed, you shall be telegraphed for, at once, and Franz—my man—will bring you on safely. I will answer for him with my life!"

It was Kazia Petroffsky's one act of self-assertion of the year, to take her husband aside before his departure.

"You must tell her the whole truth," the good wife said. "Hold nothing back; for I can hear her light foot pacing her room nightly, long after you have slept! She is dying by inches! My God, have mercy on the man who so daringly tempts His Providence."

Three days later, the priest sat by the Princess Prascovie Zastrow's bedside, in her quiet retreat in the environs of Geneva.

He started, to see the inroads of care and sorrow upon that noble face.

And soon he knew all the burdens of her new misery.

Father Anastasius had telegraphed a few words of cheer to his wife before he finished reading the letters which Princess Prascovie had placed in his hands.

They were all dated from a western American city, and Paul Zastrow's last demands for a considerable sum of money were coupled with threats which showed all the baseness of his cruel heart.

"I dared not write or send these on to you, my good friend," said the hollow-eyed Princess; "but you are the one loyal heart left to me now! To raise this sum of money without the sale of my last property in Rus-

sia would be impossible ; to try to borrow further there is futile, and I can not return to Russia without perhaps being detained to answer to the law for harboring General Wraxine's fugitive wife. He seems to be championed by those who are handling the huge spoils of the Rovno camp ; and poor Marie's property was all duly forfeited and turned over ! To leave this mad boy without this money is to tempt his final desperation, and, at last, the Baroness Xenie Kalomine has thrown off the mask ! It is she who has married this great financier—the Bank Director—and he now holds the principal claims upon my landed property ! I can not—I dare not—face the consequences of Paul breaking his oath to me, for Marie's sake ! Poor child ! Let her live on, if she can, under the delusion that he still loves her—that he may some day repair his wrong ! But, to me, this reproach—the last—that I will drive him to the sale of his honor by denying him this money, it is the bitterness of death ! ”

“ And what is to be done ? ” demanded the priest.

“ But, one last loophole of escape is open to me ! ” murmured the Princess. “ I know our Ambassador in Paris—a good and gallant man, the friend of happier days ! I shall leave here and go to him ! I can tell him all, under the seal of his honor, even where Paul's child is, where Marie is sheltered, and of all your noble fidelity ! With his aid—sheltered by him—I may be able to sacrifice my remaining property—the huge sugar mills of Kief, upon which Kalomine even now has some considerable encumbrances ! And, failing in that, we must look to God alone, for help ! I have called you here to place all my papers and family documents in your possession ! I need your aid—your counsel—your promise that Marie Wraxine shall not know of this meditated baseness ; for, I fear to trust myself alone in Paris. There is the secret police. The circle who have vowed Marie's ultimate ruin are powerful ; and now I must only risk myself ! But, whatever happens, she must not know ! And swear to me that you will keep it from her—should any harm befall—until the last ! I burn my ships when I go to Paris ! It is my last effort ! ”

For two days, the kindly priest busied himself with every preparation, and then, received the control of the archives and personal effects of the noble pilgrim of Love.

The stars shone down on them when they said farewell, as the clanging bells told of the departure of the Paris train. "I have tried to shield the innocent—to repair the wrong done by my son—to be a mother to this motherless girl who was betrayed into this heartless marriage and then—hounded into shame! Promise me that you will remember this as long as you look upon the face of little Paul!"

"A martyr of Love!" murmured Father Anastasius, as he walked alone by the rushing Rhone.

He remained for a day to securely deposit the papers and valuable archives in a bank, and to cover the sudden disappearance of the stately stranger at whose secluded life the frankly curious Swiss had wondered.

But, guarding the secrets of her social sorrows, the old priest hastened back to Dresden.

And all the innocent dissimulation of his honest heart—all the authority he possessed over his wife—was needed to comfort the lonely watcher there in the Altstadt.

For Marie Wraxine, too fondly true to the man who had wrecked her life, only murmured: "Tell me that Paul is not dead—only tell me that!"

And then, she fell senseless in his arms, with the happy release of her unspeakable joy.

It was two weeks later when Anastasius Petroffsky fell on his knees in a transport of joy on reading the long-expected letter of the Princess Prascovie.

"Count Mohrendorf has acted as a man of honor, a true friend, and my old and tried confidant. He has taken over, upon himself, the future sale of the estate, and has advanced me forty thousand francs in gold. Twenty thousand have been cabled to Paul, so that I can now send you a deposit of fifteen thousand francs to provide for Marie and little Paul. And, the Ambassador has also undertaken to endeavor to unveil the infamy of the spy Kinsky in fastening the crime of theft upon my son! Then, if Paul should be pardoned

for his mad passion, the death of General Wraxine would leave my son free to give to Marie his name in marriage, cleared of all past shame. I shall remain here, secretly, protected by the Ambassador; and the funds have been sent from Geneva! No one is to know of my presence here—not even Paul—lest the secret service agents try to counteract my efforts. Secrecy is all we need for a few months now! I write all from Geneva; and I only go out at night, under a secret escort from the Embassy."

"Light at last!" cried Father Anastasius. "And now, Prince Paul can keep his oath!"

CHAPTER XII.

HIS GOLDEN FORTUNE—AN AMERICAN QUEEN.

The chilly November winds were whistling over the bleak hills around Paris, and lamps were already being lighted in the cozy shadows of bourgeois homes.

There was the blue-white gleam of the electric light, sparkling out in café and hall, and the nervous Gaul shivered in his pardessus as the unwieldly "busses" toiled over the asphalt.

The dreary day of early winter was dying in cold, gray skies.

In this waning afternoon the Count Mohrendorf sat alone in his study at the Ambassade de Russie. The sound of retreating footsteps was heard as the glad-some clerks began to escape from the Consulate General.

And then, a brooding silence began to reign in the daily crowded corridors of N°. 79 Rue de Grenelle. For the Embassy and Consulate General were both in the same stately pile—the property of the Czar.

"What is it, Baptiste?" wearily demanded the tired representative of the Czar, as his one trusted body servant opened the private door from the Ambassador's personal sanctum.

"It is the veiled lady again, Madame Mertens, Sir,"

whispered the one attaché of the household, who was not a secret Russian spy.

"Show her in, and say that I will join her, as usual! Not here, remember; never here!"

The grave-faced servitor withdrew noiselessly.

"Faithful fellow," mused Count Mohrendorf, as he hastily thrust some newspaper cuttings into his private drawer.

The great Ambassador might have qualified his admiration for Baptiste, had he known that the man who had resisted all the seductions of Mohrendorf's secret enemies, was really paid the salary of a General of Division for selling all his private observations, direct to the French foreign office.

"But, how can I tell her? How dare I tell her?" sighed the functionary, pacing the long room in an agony of indecision.

"If I could only get her to return to Geneva, it seems that I might then have the courage to write to her there. I could always send her a little money. And yet, she may not discover the truth for some time! She probably never sees the Paris *New York Herald*! Her griefs are with her always!"

It had been with a brotherly tenderness that Mohrendorf had watched for months over the Princess Prascovie.

For the gallant noble remembered his own youthful days as First Secretary of Embassy with the splendid Prince Zastrow, at London, in the old days of Crimean "storm and stress"!

And so, he had found out a safe retreat at Fontainebleau for "Madame Mertens"—a widowed lady of commercial rank.

And the Princess was safe in this mercantile incognito. His prevision had also given her a loyal woman attendant, a stranded Russian merchant's widow, and there was a modest little fiacre for the Princess to run around town in.

No one had ever pierced the mystery of that heavy veil, and even Baptiste deeply regretted, with his ear at the keyhole, that the conversations of the Ambassador

and his frequent visitor were all carried on in a strange language.

For, Fate, otherwise so kind to Monsieur Baptiste Delorme, had denied him an education in the Polish tongue.

"Probably an old love, once a passion, now a memory," mused the judicious Baptiste, "and a valuable memory to her," for the smug secret spy rightly divined that the flames of passion had long since cooled upon the altar of the middle-aged woman's lonely heart.

But, he noted the deep respect of the Ambassador as always shown to his strange guest, and, at last, with a happy thought, the Frenchman guessed, at random:

"It is a connection, très-honorable! A poor relation!"

When Count Ivan Mohrendorf entered his private cabinet, the Princess Prascovie was seated at the window in an abandon of utter despair.

She sprang up and seized the Count's hands.

"There is news—there must be news!"

"Alas! My dear friend, nothing!" sighed the Ambassador.

"It all seems so hard! I have exhausted all my personal influence, and yet I can not trace the veiled opposition to the Prince Paul's pardon. The price of the property at Kief is agreed upon. The last legal formality only delays us now! For in his present state of ex-officer—subject not '*en règle*'—and a soldier absent from Russia without leave, the interest of your son in the property would, by law, descend to his innocent wife or child. We must, however, attach to the deed the proofs that there is no wife or child. For then, dear lady, you are the only heir, and your single deed, attested by me, would bring about the total payment forthwith!"

Ivan Mohrendorf buried his face in his hands as Prascovie Zastrow sprang up crying:

"Impossible! Never!"

The Ambassador lifted his head and gazed at her.

"This money, a portion of it, once in your hands, and used judiciously, would purchase his pardon. You know what Russia is," he sadly sighed. "And,

after that, you could easily arrange the other matters in time, if Wraxine should only die!"

He stood before her as she struggled with her warring soul, for the pardon of Paul Zastrow was the one temptation which life had still left to offer her!

It was as if the door of Paradise swung open before her.

"Do not tempt me, Ivan!" sobbed Prascovie Zastrow, bursting into bitter tears.

"Read this letter!"

When the Ambassador had finished the words traced by the hand of honest Anastasius Petroffsky, he handed it sadly back to her!

"You are right, Madame la Princesse. Whatever is the way, it must not begin with the slaughter of the innocents! I have heard some dark hints as to the social pursuit of poor Marie Kriloff at Odessa—of her betrayal by that heartless devil, the Karovitch, and that wanton Barbe Anykoff. And when I know that Xenie Karovitch made that hideous marriage; when I think of Wraxine as he was, a man who never spared any woman, I feel that this lonely orphan was delivered—bound hand and foot—over to shame. Better had she thrown herself over the beetling wall of the port, for this is now the beginning of the end, and the wages of sin is death! She must not be betrayed by you, at the last! Let her still think that there is one good woman left on earth, one human heart, brave, noble, and true!"

There was the light of manhood on his high brow, and Mohrendorf's black eyes gleamed fiercely above his curling sable beard.

"There is but one hope left now. De Giers has promised me a favor. He thinks I wish some gaudy personal preferment. Return to your home! I will telegraph to him in cipher, and beg, à tout hazard, for your son's pardon, on the ground of a high Imperial justice. For then, he could testify even in America, and so frighten the Neckers and Kalomine by threatening a disclosure of all their frauds at Rovno! Go, now, my dear friend! And, as for this fading white lily, we will try to bring the roses back to her cheeks! You must,

at any rate, soon get the mother and child into Switzerland! I will send my own courier to guard and aid you! And, now, live in hopes, till I hear from De Giers!"

With the shadowed stars of her eyes beaming tenderly upon him, Prascovie Zastrow passed out into the corridor! She drew back timidly a moment as the doors of the Consulate General opened, and then smiled as she dropped her veil and followed the departing crowd down the corridor.

Count Mohrendorf stepped back into his office, dismissing hastily Baptiste, who had just lit the two argands!

"Hasten and see Madame Mertens to her carriage!"

"Now for one last appeal to my dear old chief," mused the Ambassador. "De Giers never denied me a favor! This may stop this crowning crime—if we are quick enough—if he will only act! Oh! For just ten minutes at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs!"

He had drawn out the mass of American newspaper clippings which the artful Baptiste had vainly tried to read, cursing them for being in English, a form of communication which he but dimly saw in his mind's eye—"as through a glass, darkly."

But the Ambassador suddenly dropped the papers, as there was the sound of trampling feet, and the frightened Baptiste suddenly dashed into the room:

"They are bringing her in here! My God! She is dying!"

And as the excited Count Mohrendorf sprang to the door, he saw a half dozen stalwart men tenderly bearing the senseless body of the Princess Prascovie.

"In here!" cried the noble, throwing open the door of his private study. "Get doctors, quick!"

Then, with a reverent hand, he tore aside the shrouding veil as the Princess Zastrow's noble face was revealed in all the ashen pallor of death!

It was the agile Baptiste who darted back with a caught-up flacon of cognac; but, alas, the pallid lips were stained with a cold froth; the fingers twitched but feebly as the majestic woman lay gasping upon the divan!

Right and left the crowd parted as a gray-bearded physician glided to the side of the prostrate woman.

With a wave of his hand, Doctor Auger motioned them all back.

"Restez, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur!" he muttered.

In a few moments he lifted his head from the noble heart stilled forever.

"Angina pectoris," he sadly said. "C'en est fine!"

While the Doctor vainly strove to discern some last lingering sign of life, Count Mohrendorf drew Baptiste and the waiting driver of the carriage aside into his study.

"Tell me all, quickly!" the Ambassador sternly cried.

"There was a young gentleman and lady who came out of the Consulate General's," stammered Baptiste. "I had followed Madame to aid her to her carriage! Suddenly she sees the gentleman, a handsome young monsieur! 'Paul!' she cries, in a breaking voice. The young lady is already in her carriage."

"And," broke in the coachman, "he, the monsieur, pushes madame roughly off! 'You are crazy,' he cries, 'I know you not!' Pouf! The carriage dashes away! And, Madame then reels as if shot in the duel! With one sharp cry, she falls, raide morte! Voilà tout!"

"The young lady—une belle Americaine, blonde et très richement vêtue!" hastily adds Baptiste.

"Summon the Consul General, instantly, to join me here!" moodily cries Ivan Mohrendorf, his face becoming ashen pale with the horror of a dawning secret.

When he entered his own room it was tenanted only by the majesty of death, for the physician was now guarding the door of the corridor where a crowd had quickly assembled.

In five minutes there was a circle of all the frightened ladies of the Embassy watching over their sister of sorrows, while the coachman was lashing his horses to bring from Fontainebleau the humble woman who had divided Prascovie Zastrow's sorrows for all these long weeks of waiting.

Mechanically Count Mohrendorf replied to the veteran physician's polite phrases.

"Monsieur le Comte will find me ready to fulfill all the usual formalities. It was some sudden shock—a desperate foe is angina pectoris—a very sword of Damocles!"

He laid his professional card upon the table.

"I will visit you myself, or send my first secretary, Monsieur le Docteur Auger," said the official. "And the Commissary of Police shall be visited by myself in person." The physician sented a scandal.

"The name of the decedent?" silkily asked the practitioner.

"Madame Mertens," replied the Ambassador, in a choking voice. "A dear and a beloved friend."

Baptiste sprang to his master's side.

"The Consul General had left by his private entrance," said the servant, "and has not as yet learned of this distressing event. He has gone away to Versailles to a little dinner with Monsieur le Comte d'Orenburg. And, he will not return till to-morrow."

With an instant recognition of his subordinates usual amourettes, Mohrendorf cried:

"Bring me the Chancellor!"

Ten minutes later, Count Mohrendorf raised his head from a silent inspection of the Consul General's official minutes.

There was the tell-tale entry.

"Provisional passport of Prince Paul Zastrow and Madame la Princesse Clara Brandon Zastrow, issued and visad for a departure to Nice."

With a nod of his head, the Ambassador quietly dismissed the young official.

Left alone, he clenched his hands in a hopeless rage.

"And so this is a brutal murder; not a visitation of God! Cold-hearted, cowardly murder, and as base as he who denied Christ is the wretch who denied his mother. This gallant-hearted woman, God's true gift to a weary world!"

And while the startled attachés were hurrying hither and thither on the business of the dark, nameless guest in that silenced room, loyal Ivan Mohrendorf locked himself in to read the glowing forecasts of Paul Zastrow's golden fortune.

For it seemed true that the disgraced noble had romantically married an American Queen of the Court of Mammon!

Suddenly a thought swept over Mohrendorf's mind which made him feel that a legacy of sacred love had descended upon him.

"Poor Marie Kriloff!" sighed the startled man. "And her helpless babe! This dog shall pay to the uttermost farthing! But I must think—think!"

And yet he hastily indited a telegram to Father Anastasius Petroffsky at the Russian Chapel, Dresden, Saxony.

Before midnight the good priest was roused up to read the fateful words.

"Come instantly to Paris as my guest. Report answer. Keep journey secret. Fail not."

The signature, "Le Comte de Mohrendorf," filled the old man's heart with joy.

"All is well—thank God!" the priest cried, as he sank to his knees. "Her heart is at rest—at last!"

For he hailed the good news which he fondly fancied now awaited Marie.

And late that night, while the train was rushing along bearing the happy-hearted Petroffsky, Ivan Mohrendorf sat silently at Versailles, watching over the stiffening form there, with the white roses hiding the untroubled breast.

And God's majestic pall of peace had descended upon the stately features now softening into the waxen beauty of past days.

None of the attachés dared to try to pierce the mystery of the sudden visitation, and even the grave Commissaire de Police had bowed and departed in a sad silence, awed by Mohrendorf's haunting eyes.

Only this stern, silent man knew that the brilliantly handsome couple who had suddenly flashed in at the Hotel Meurice, as "risen golden stars," had quickly taken the early evening train for Nice.

It was a cowardly retreat! Only Ivan Mohrendorf knew of the secret of Paul Zastrow's craven brutality and instant flight.

"There is always time enough for two things in this

world," growled Mohrendorf. "Death and revenge! I will send those who shall find this unnatural coward out! Perhaps the Consul General knows something of this strange story. Perhaps I may have to face him, the matricide, with legal proofs. But first, to place Father Petroffsky here in charge of my dead sister of the heart. She shall go to her grave like a queen!"

It was almost an impossible fairy tale which Ivan Mohrendorf read in the printed slips sent to him by the Paris New York *Herald* for confirmation as to the young Don Juan's identity.

That Miss Clara Brandon, the willful and light-hearted heiress of Hugh Brandon, the great railway millionaire, should yield to a sudden romantic passion for the handsome Russian Prince on his travels, seemed to be a bit of appalling social recklessness, in view of the public record of Paul Zastrow's duels, debts, escapades, intrigues, and darkly shaded exploits.

And yet, there it all was, all set out in efflorescent American journalism.

The romantic meeting of the lovers in Colorado; the gallant record of the prospective bridegroom in the Imperial Guard; his strange exile from Russia for some innocent political tangles; the rumors of an early adjustment of the Prince's temporary disfavor, and the description of the forthcoming festivities—the chatter of wedding dresses, jewels, social functions, and future glories.

Ivan Mohrendorf laid down the comments of the opportune journals, with an equal disgust; there were many agnostic doubts as to Paul Zastrow's title, identity, and station, closing with the wild adjuration: "And so, old Hugh Brandon's millions will be scattered by a reckless foreigner! Another American heiress duped, etc."

"He is a cleverer scoundrel than I took him for!" growled the Ambassador. "He only needed to desert his princely mother and break her heart to complete his record! And yet, God has decreed him the one thing which he craved—his mother's silence! For this cold-hearted brute will now bargain for his pardon, with this silly girl's money—and he will get it!"

There is no one left now to speak for poor Marie and her child! It is the devil's own juggling!"

And then, the full, dastardly scheme rushed on Mohrendorf's mind.

"He took some sudden alarm! He hastened the marriage—perhaps he even forced an elopement! And now, from Nice—the paradise of swindlers and wantons—he can safely bargain for his Imperial pardon! He will succeed!"

But the stern-hearted man standing there, as he took leave of the dead that night, laid his hand upon the pulseless heart.

"I swear to you," he softly said, "dead sister of mine! "that the deserted child shall find in me the father of the fatherless."

And then, when a week had glided away, all Paris knew that a lady of the highest rank, visiting the Embassy incognito, had been laid away with all the stately splendor of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Czar's representative himself was the chief mourner, and nothing was spared in the solemn rites, only, when all was over, two hollow-eyed men, seated in the Ambassador's study, feared to ask each other "What shall we do next?"

Beyond Mohrendorf's careful sealing and removing to the Embassy of every sacred object touched by the vanished hand, there was nothing left in sight to achieve.

Daily, Anastasius Petroffsky, with the heart-stricken woman comrade of Princess Zastrow's retirement, prayed beside the coffin, draped in its purple velvet pall, there in the somber vaults, and still covered with the unfaded roses showered upon her who died for her mother love—the woman who fought the losing battle for the helpless and the innocent.

And, of the two who looked now at each other in a gloomy silence, the humble old priest was braver than the man who had often ridden in battle's storm; for, while Petroffsky well knew that, while Count Mohrendorf would follow up his grim work in silence, the Ambassador dared not ask the man of God which of them should tell Marie Kriloff of the death of the Prin-

cess Zastrow, of Paul's double betrayal, and the horror of that broken oath still registered before high Heaven!

But a ferocious scowl settled upon Count Mohrendorf's face when he at last achieved the running through of his confidential correspondence.

The courier from St. Petersburg had brought on a special bag, and there were cipher telegrams from Nice which roused him to action.

He had already laid his plans for a secret vengeance upon the successful adventurer—the unnatural son who had so coldly disowned his princely hearted mother.

Mohrendorf was a diplomat of the highest finesse, and the midnight train, after Prascovie's death seizure, had carried his nephew, Serge, down to Nice on a delicate mission.

"Find out all about them; ingratiate yourself with this honeymoon pair; conceal your official character, and get my cipher telegrams at the Consulate. You can tell Consul Obranovitch there, Serge, that if he discloses your identity I will dismiss him forthwith from the Imperial service. He will have a telegraphed warning from me! And, above all, conceal the death of Princess Frascovie."

And so, Serge Mohrendorf, the light-hearted third attaché, beamed in upon the Vanity Fair on the Riviera as simply another golden Russian pigeon, waiting ready to be plucked.

When this secret agent had been dispatched, the Ambassador had turned to the singularly startled Consul-General for an explanation of his action in issuing a passport to the man who had grasped old Hugh Brandon's millions by a forlorn hope dash upon the orphaned heiress' heart.

Mohrendorf listened calmly to the Consul-General's specious statement, as he sat there toying with his jeweled cigarette-case.

"He had his book of birth, the certified marriage papers; and, as a noble by birth, I could not refuse him a temporary passport, and a full one, for Madame la Princesse."

"If you had consulted me," said the Ambassador, "you would have learned that it was beyond your power to give these papers, for Paul Zastrow is under attaint, until his disabilities are legally removed. He can use no rights as a Russian noble until he has either been pardoned or returned to Russia to stand in jeopardy. You may now erase the entry on your official minutes, or, better, indorse—'Annulled by the order of the Ambassador'! I have already telegraphed to Obranovitch, at Nice, to take up the two passports. Leave the whole matter now in my hands!"

And when the Consul-General had made his escape, he wondered if Paul Zastrow would dare to demand back the golden bribe which had paid off the Consul-General's most pressing gambling debts.

Left alone in his study, the superior followed his retreating subordinate with scornful eyes.

"Of course, Zastrow bought this base tchinovik's certificate! It is as well to let Zastrow lose his bribe; but Serge can take up the two passports easily through the Consul at Nice—and I can hold the annulment over them!"

Count Ivan Mohrendorf had recalled the crushing blow of the sudden loss of his own beautiful wife and child, in the days of his buoyant youth, and now, still a widower at sixty, the silvered hair and care-furrowed face told of his sorrow's vigil in these long, lonely years.

He had vainly tried to find a way to safely communicate the death of the Princess Prascovie to the helpless woman, with a strange flutter of joy in her heart, now awaiting the priest's return at Dresden.

"As usual, lying gives the only temporary relief!" muttered Mohrendorf, when he directed Father Anastasius to write to his anxious wife, speciously explaining his delay by the illness of the Princess Zastrow.

"And you may as well say that the affairs are all in good shape, and that you will be detained several weeks, awaiting the course of business by my orders."

"My church?" gasped the faithful priest.

"Let your assistant attend to it," kindly said Moh-

rendorf. "I've telegraphed my colleague at Berlin that you are my guest on a vacation of a month; for I must conceal Princess Zastrow's death in order to help these two helpless ones!"

And Anastasius Petroffsky began to wonder at the Ambassador's sagacity when he wrote, at his dictation, a priestly appeal to the Baroness Xenie Kalomine, née Karovitch, to surrender for the use of the suffering Marie Kriloff the inheritance legally forfeited to her by Marie's flight.

The appeal, as dictated, brought scalding tears to the honest priest's eyes, but he murmured: "They will surely find her out through this. God knows what may not happen!"

"Never!" calmly said Mohrendorf. "They will only look for her here; you will date it at Paris, and I will send it on to the Metropolitan, of St. Petersburg. He, the head of the Synod of Our Holy Church, is free of their spies, and—upon her answer now will depend peace or war! For, I will strike a blow which will reach their flinty hearts!" The old man's soul was stirred by the misery of the innocent!

There was a subject which neither of the men dared to face—the future of the innocent natural child, looking only for a station and name to the callous father whose brutal denial had slain his own mother!

"Poor innocent! In the panther's claws!" sighed Mohrendorf.

"Paul Zastrow's simple denial consigns it to the Russian Foundling Asylum, or else to the flinty charity of the German authorities."

And then, with a tender pity, the Ambassador listened to simple Kazia Petroffsky's home letters.

"Our dear Lily lady is wearing out her tender spirit! There is a light in her eyes which I never saw before! And yet, she has dreamed her own happy dreams! That the Princess Zastrow has gone to America to bring Paul home, and that all will soon be well! And, Anastasius, should there be bad news, you must be here to cheer her, for she is wearing nearer to the other world every day. The little one is rosy and

sturdy, and only God's sunlight shines down on his beaming face."

"I can not undeceive her," said Mohrendorf, with a groan. "You are the holder of God's hope—of His Word. We must find the most merciful way."

It was two weeks after Prascovie Zastrow had been laid in the tomb when Father Anastasius was suddenly called from Fontainebleau to the Embassy.

The carriage was the Ambassador's own, and Petroffsky hastened to obey the orders of Baptiste.

"The house here is to go on just the same. You are to say nothing of your movements. I have orders to bring away all your luggage."

While Baptiste spoke to the woman, who bitterly mourned her vanished mistress, the old priest descended to the carriage.

"It is His Excellency's wish," said Baptiste, "that this house remain just as Madame Mertens left it! Not a thing is to be changed, and you will receive all your supplies and orders through me!"

The watchful Baptiste was doomed to a sad disappointment when Count Mohrendorf and the priest sat down to a dinner served in the private study.

A sudden commission at Havre betook him away for a two days' absence.

"Peste," he growled, "I must obey or else lose my place; and now, I shall never be able to tell the Minister of Foreign Affairs who Madame Mertens was! Robbed—simply robbed—of fifty thousand extra francs in this!"

But, Baptiste was wise in his generation, and he found that he was closely watched all the way to Havre.

And none of the twenty curious gossips in the Embassy—not even the frightened Consul-General—knew how Father Anastasius Petroffsky vanished that night, or whither; for he was not seen again, and his rusty black robe had left no telltale shadow behind it!

The Ambassador himself had slept abroad that evening; and even the station agent, who quickly switched on a special car for Nice, never knew that its sole occupant was an obscure priest, after the second passenger had leaped out on a siding, a hundred miles from

Paris. It was a case of "stole away," and all the spies were left in wonderment and ignorance.

Father Anastasius, startled by the imperative injunctions of Count Mohrendorf, did not dare till daybreak to look at the pocketbook which had been presed on him for the voyage, but the sum of ten thousand francs, in blue bank billets, seemed to him a princely fortune.

He could hear the Count's last words ringing in his ears: "You are to obey my nephew Serge! He will meet you; he will come to you later at Dresden, and—you shall yet have your reward. Fear nothing, trust in God—the wolf will never enter your door!"

Shielded by the mighty noble, whose hoarded up wealth was proverbial in Russia, a Count of the Empire; a patrimonial suzerain, whose scattered lands were veiled in Ural snows and parched in Kherson heat; who owned mines, and fleets, fat herds and mane-tossing bands of Ukraine steeds, yet Anastasius Petroffsky betook himself to prayer, knowing what lay before him.

"Life! What is Life!" murmured the priest. "Only the long record of human heartbreak; of disappointed hopes; of mad folly, or of dull despair! We are only as shadows that pass—mere phases—the empty echo of a voice, soon stilled in the all-pervading silence of Death! For, only Death is King; his gloomy scepter casts its shadow alike over the arched Imperial crown, the triple tiara of Popes, the panoply of the haughty warrior, the bewitching presence of loveliness in its vernal bloom! To-morrow—but a brief to-morrow—and we are all as nothing!"

Pale and stern in the moonlight, clasping his hands in a warm adieu, Mohrendorf had given him his last orders.

"You will tell this American Princess the whole story! And—do my nephew's bidding!"

There was but one golden gleam—the loyal ring of Mohrendorf's voice, as he swore to be as a father to the helpless child, left nameless now, and with no estate but the inheritance of the bastard's shame.

Dominated by the iron will of Mohrendorf, the priest

dared not let his thoughts run on to his humble home; but he had silently written the messages and letters which he had left behind, to be forwarded by the Ambassador, who had sent a liberal douceur of money to the delighted Kazia—a woman of practical parts and few idealities.

"Not a word is to precede your own arrival," was the Count's last order; "but, Serge will go and bring your wife to you on your arrival in Dresden. For she, too, will have her part to play. And, Serge will guide her!"

Before Father Anastasius reached Nice upon his mysterious mission, Count Ivan Mohrendorf had seen the light flash across the deeply laid designs of the audacious young bridegroom!

For the diplomatic bag from the Neva had brought to Mohrendorf the cold-hearted ultimatum of the triumphant Baroness Xenie Kalomine.

Addressed to the priest, it breathed all the venom of her husband, intent now upon quickly swallowing up Princess Zastrow's last estates, in the ignorance of her death.

"Let the outcast work, or starve!" were the words of scorn penned by the victorious Xenie. "She hurled herself down, and now, she knows what a shield of honor—a lover's faith—is! Disgrace to our family, let the grave hide her! She has marketed her charms, and is now paying the price. The law forces her inheritance upon me, there being no child. And—I only obey the Czar! Not one single rouble will I send! Let Madame la Princesse Zastrow support her! She has openly harbored her son's paramour."

"Cursed be this foul hypocrite!" growled Mohrendorf. "Thanks be to God, innocent or not, I can enforce the restitution of this property to Marie Kriloff's child! If the law has sharp teeth, it also has a long arm! My Lady, the game is only on, now!"

There was also a startling surprise in Baron Alexandre Kalomine's final answer to the propositions of sale of the estate.

"I have great regret in informing your Excellency that the great sugar factories at Kief, for which we

were treating, were totally destroyed by fire, three weeks ago ; and, as the insurances were transferred to me, the moneys become legally mine. For the lands themselves, they are still covered by the mortgages for my cash advances, and will be so held ! For these there can be no settlement till the final title of young Prince Paul Zastrow shall be joined. And so, whether he may be pardoned or not, his son would hold these lands. His marriage to an American heiress of millions is reported by telegraph. I would recommend Madame la Princesse Zastrow to apply to her son, now vastly enriched, for funds ! ”

The Ambassador sighed as he dropped the letters. “ Poor Prascovie ! How well you kept the secret of Marie’s sad motherhood ! And yet, even this may be the means of trapping them—for a claim can be put in on behalf of the child ! By Saint Vladimir ! Kalomine has stolen the insurance money ! No doubt he burned the mills to get it ! Six hundred thousand roubles in one vast theft ! ”

There was but one document left ; and it was an hour before Ivan Mohrendorf had deciphered his nephew Serge’s lengthy dispatch.

But there was a gleam of triumph in the old diplomat’s eyes when he scanned the completed translation.

“ Just in time ! God is with us ! The enemy gives us the breathing spell that I must have.”

Serge’s energetic appeal had roused every tingling nerve to action.

“ You must send an agent here at once. Zastrow has freely confided in me. He goes to Vienna to-morrow to meet the Imperial Bank Director Kalomine. Zastrow’s American wife is a most charming girl, simply toying with the title of Princess. But, she is both noble and generous, and, anxious to shine at Court. She has already given her bridegroom a great money present.”

“ Under pretense of a gentlemen’s hunting party with Prince Schwartzenburg, Zastrow goes alone to Vienna ; leaves me here as social introducer to his wife. The Prince is still ignorant of his mother’s death. Kalomine is to use the funds and get Paul Zastrow’s

pardon in return for his silence as to Rovno frauds. The finance ring can do all they wish. Zastrow is to wait at Vienna till Kalomine returns to St. Petersburg, telegraphs the pardon, and then, will take his wife there. The Grand Duke Anatole is their cat's paw. He was Madame Kalomine's lover!"

"Now, by the gods of war," cried the happy Count, "I will let him fool himself! And—I will take a trip myself to the Neva! Prince Paul shall find an interrupted honeymoon!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN INTERRUPTED HONEYMOON.

The gray mists of a lowering afternoon were drifting through the olive and ilex trees hiding the Villa Amati, when the Princess Clara Zastrow turned her saddened face away from the window.

For, in all the far expanse of leaden sea and gray skies, the dreary stretch of fog-wrapped hills, she saw no comfort in her enforced widowhood of a dozen days.

It was but two days since the bright and resolute bridegroom had strained her to his breast, murmuring:

"Darling, be brave, for my sake! Keep my secret! I only go to Vienna that you may receive your summons to the Court on the Neva!"

And so, Clara Brandon, hardly yet familiar with her new title and changed name, listened trustfully to that voice which had never yet sued to a woman in vain.

It had been so easy for the handsome husband to arouse every drop of her unspent romanticism, and so, with moist, but tenderly loving eyes, she had watched the soldierly looking lover wave his last adieu from the lodge gates.

And artfully Prince Paul had also aroused her girlish terrors with weird stories of Russian duplicity!

"Not a word to a living soul but me. Trust to no one! Keep your counsel; smile on all, yet say nothing, for Nice is almost a Russian colony, and the tide of court intrigue ebbs and flows here as on the Neva!"

Every choice bit of esclandre bubbling out here, reaches the Czar's Court by telegraph!"

And so, with all the faith of a new-made wife, a proud, passionate girl now in love with Love, for Love's own sweet sake, Princess Clara felt no distrust when the Russian Consul-General called and took away the two passports "for revision."

"These are the mere thousand-and-one formalities of our Russian system," laughed Paul. "It is simply loaded down with obsolete red tape! But, I will soon sweep this all away, for the Grand Duke Anatole is my secret friend, and you shall hear it soon from his own princely lips in the Winter Palace."

The brilliant young Princess Zastrow had already drawn a court of flatterers around her, and in this new fairyland she was happy to range from Cap San Martin to Vinti, Menton, Monaco, Villefranche, and Antibes, in the lead of a joyous procession following her youth, golden beauty, and the magic wand of wealth.

This rich, buoyant, social life seemed so different to the hardscrabble business death-grapple of the rough city of Denver.

And even Nature wooed the young bride in her unfolding life, the warm south wind caressing her here in these enchanted hills, so rich, so storied—so far away from the bleak crags of Colorado!

And the men, too, were a different race from the lean money-grubbers of the Golden West; the sallow speculators, jaded "business men," and promoted day laborers of her native Denver.

The mellow Italian, the suave, insinuating French, the automatically obsequious hochwohlgeboren Germans, all courted this golden goose whose feathers were being deftly plucked!

Alas! Clara Brandon, her heart resurgent with loosened love, forgot Offenbach's merry lines—"Courtiers must be ever bowing—ever bowing!"

In all the luxuriance of princely coronets, now painted, curved, festooned, and monogrammed over her yet shop-raw Parisian outfit—"en grande dame"—the dazzled child of the self-made American never realized

that, though "she ruled the roast," she "paid the scot" for, all the flatterers who bowed before her! She was simply a Horn of Plenty!

She had been perfectly happy until Paul's departure for Vienna upon this mysteriously veiled mission, for the life at Nice enchanted her.

And it was Baron Serge Mohrendorf who had drawn the curtains of the delightful Vanity Fair. The tall, blue-eyed Russian aristocrat had easily captivated the sly Prince Paul.

For all men knew that the Baron was the third attaché of the Russian Embassy at Paris—a man of high standing, and the nephew and heir of one of the Czar's most princely subjects.

With sleek self-gratulation and a growing contentment, Prince Paul Zastrow saw his friend Serge Mohrendorf rally a choice circle of "blue blood" around the pretty American milionairess bride, upon whose girlish brows a coronet had seemingly dropped from cloudland.

Clara Zastrow listened in a dreamy delight to the forthcoming round of waiting social joys—the yacht races, the *Tir aux Pigeons*, the *Bataille des Fleurs*, the dinners, the masques, and *grandes bals de société*, the *fêtes champêtre*, and all the easy ways of linking one happy day to another in the heated, fictitious Paradise of the Riviera.

The high-sounding titles seemed still toothsome morsels—"Countess, Marchesa," "Madame la Princesse"—and, at every soirée, the stately, insidious young Don Juans proudly bore the uniforms of the whole world—the stars, ribands, and orders of a dozen Kings and Emperors. It was a Cinderella's Ball!

And thus, her heart was proud and thrilled as she wandered on the *Promenade des Anglais*, or swept along in her *victoria* through the leafy mazes of Castle Hill.

Gliding out on the moonlit waters, she soon learned to love the mellow Venetian barcaroles; and the wine of Life stirred in her heart, an opening rose.

The Princess Zastrow, brilliantly clad, "en reine de

"Saba," was the star of the Lardin Public—the queen of the opera, the belle of every ball.

And no lighter heart was wafted down the happy days—like a feather ball—than beat in the bosom of the child of the man who had strained up to fortune, twisting, for years, a grimy railway brake; the girl whose drudging mother had followed an emigrant wagon from "Saint Joe" to Denver, in the days when her poor possessions were only a few calico frocks and a string of glass beads!

And yet, there was a high soul, a dauntless spirit, dwelling in the symmetrical frame of this audacious young American beauty.

Though feebly furnished forth with graces at the Denver Academy, she had blossomed out into a dreamy eyed young Queen of Mammon, and budded into a princess with the rapidity of a dream of the night. She had brought but some useful accomplishments away from the Denver finishing school—fortunately a good knowledge of French, Italian, and German.

Happy at heart, Clara Zastrow, on the evening of her début in the "golden book" circle of Nice, had gazed at her own resplendent self in the mirror, which showed her an enchanting vision!

Thrilled with happiness, she joyously cried: "I am a Princess now—a real Princess—and, I owe it all to Paul, my hero husband!" It had been easy for her "hero husband" to sidetrack one or two little haunting annoyances at Nice.

Old amourettes, forgotten debts, a dangerous gossip or two, were deftly handled; and his crowning touch of genius was the superb diamond bracelet which recalled him to that merciless social fiend, the old Princesse Crayekowski, an ogre who had never in her life spared a trembling victim.

"You may have forgotten our little wager," smiled Prince Paul—"our bet that I would be married within ten years! Permit me, Madame la Princesse, to show you that I never forget, and—to introduce you to my wife!"

It was magnificently done, for, over the helpless head

of the lonely American ingénue now waved the awful victorious ensign of the hardy old Crayekowski,—a proud Muscovite dame whose bitter tongue even the Czar feared!

And, happy in all her splendor, the whole of the Riviera admitted that the Princess Clara “avait bien fait son chemin !”

The clouds flitted away from the listless Clara Zastrow’s face as the butler presented the card of Baron Serge Mohrendorf.

She never waited to notice the penciled words, but gladly cried: “I will receive Monsieur le Baron.”

In her mind were happy visions of the Grand Bal d’Hiver, at which, under the guardianship of the Princess Crayekowski, she was to lead the cotillon with Baron Serge Mohrendorf.

“Tout Nice” was on the *qui vive*—for the rumor of the magnificent dress from Monsieur Worth’s atelier—added a new zest to Clara’s graces, for it was true that the child of the Denver brakeman danced like a wave of the sea.

But, the Princess Zastrow became suddenly grave as Serge Mohrendorf introduced Consul-General Obranovitch and the pallid-faced priest, Father Anastasius.

“I am charged with a letter from our Ambassador at Paris,” soberly said the young attaché, as he led the startled girl aside.

“Paul—my God!—tell me!” There is nothing wrong!” gasped the bride, a Princess, surely, but yet all a woman now!

“It only concerns your future rank at the Russian Court,” frankly said Serge; “and, after you have read this letter, I advise you to confer with these gentlemen! You can trust to them—upon my honor! I answer for them with my life and body. They represent the Ambassador also!”

Poor Cinderella, Clara Zastrow! The blood left her heart in a wild wave, for the taking away of the passports had been an ominous cloud upon this interrupted honeymoon.

And Paul’s warning words also!

“Shall I not telegraph to my husband?” faltered the

young Princess, her trembling fingers breaking the great family seal of the patrician Ambassador.

"By no means!" earnestly cried Serge Mohrendorf. "It concerns his mother—and yourself—and in all that touches the Prince Paul Zastrow. The Count Mohrendorf will personally communicate later with him."

The frightened girl read the lines and then gazed with astonishment upon Serge.

"I am to go to Dresden—alone!" she gasped.

"Not so!" said Serge. "Madame Obranovitch is forced to go there to consult her physician; Father Anastasius will also be of the party! I will secure a private car. By Mont Cenis and Basle, and Wurzburg, you can reach Dresden to-morrow night! Say nothing! Take even no maid! I will remain here and answer for the safety of the Villa Amati. And, Madame Obranovitch will take her maid to attend you, and I will send a courier of the Embassy to take entire charge of your voyage."

"But, I have no passport!" murmured the frightened young Princess.

"Your individual passport and that of your husband will be delivered to you at Dresden. Father Anastasius is the confidential representative of my uncle, and is the official Russian priest in Dresden," slowly said Serge.

Clara Zastrow gazed earnestly in Serge Mohrendorf's eyes.

In their clear, blue depths she saw no deceit!

Thinking of her husband's imperiled name—of the unknown mother whom she soon hoped to meet in Russia—she frankly extended her hand! "I will trust you! Take me to them! I will go!"

It was with a pitying sigh that Serge Mohrendorf left the villa, a half an hour later, to arrange for the private car to be attached to the train "*de grande vitesse*."

He left behind him the Consul-General, eagerly watching the colloquy between Clara Zastrow and the grave-faced cleric in the long, black robe.

Though Father Anastasius was a child of poverty, he was bred as a gentleman.

And it was a sad, plaintive face, with the long, black locks falling upon his shoulders—the pleading, pitying eyes—the waving, sable, silvered beard.

There was no point of color in his whole costume save the jeweled pectoral cross and the slender golden chain with which his withered fingers played. He was not sworn to the service of the Golden Calf.

“Poor child!” mused the Consul. “Trapped by this heartless adventurer—hunted down for the golden charms which are heaped up in her banker’s vaults! It is the last—the meanest—the most cowardly—of Prince Paul Zastrow’s betrayals! A helpless morsel of that defenseless game hunted since the expulsion from Paradise, poor, love-blinded woman!”

There was a fatherly tenderness in the old Greek priest’s voice as he gazed upon the brilliant young beauty, who now yielded her faith to his simple, manly solicitude.

And, there was almost a sob in Anastasius’s voice as he thought of the beautiful, pale face at Dresden—the mournful, earnest eyes of the deserted Marie Kriloff, which gazed out of the window into the lonely street of the humble Altstadt.

His wife’s letter had told him of the ominous wear-ing away of the White Lily.

The priest recalled that deserted young mother, standing there in her white robe, with her fatherless child caught to her bosom in a yearning frenzy of Love!

“It is the Virgin of Murillo—she who stands in the crescent in that immortal picture of the Hermitage! She is in the hands of Death, poor, lonely heart, and this bright-browed child is caught in the panther’s claws! May God pardon Paul Zastrow! There is no altar of God that he may dare approach, for to the threshold haunted by this broken heart I must lead this golden girl from the great land beyond the wild, green Atlantic! Led by Love—both of them—one down-ward to her death, the other—whither?”

The simple old man prayed to the God above to spare this other orphaned child.

From Anastasius’s simple words, Clara Zastrow

learned that the fate of her husband's mysterious mission to Vienna rested in her own loyal hands, and so she gave the confidence of her heart to both the men.

"I am a father, Madame la Princesse," said Obranovitch, in a broken voice. "I bring you now my wife to conduct you to Dresden and to return with you! Your trust in my honor shall not be abused; and I now ask you, on behalf of Count Mohrendorf, who represents the Czar's own personal dignity, that you will say nothing of this Dresden visit to the Prince Zastrow. It would gravely affect his future—far more seriously than your own! To show you our power, we receive, hourly, telegrams from Vienna, where he is at present negotiating with Director Kalomine, of the Imperial St. Petersburg Bank; also, from Paris, where Count Mohrendorf is in hourly communication with the Grand Duke Anatole! This concerns your rank and future as a Russian princess—your own affairs."

Clara Zastrow was frozen into a terrified silence as the last name fell upon her ear, but she bowed her head with a fitting dignity as Obranovitch humbly kissed her hand.

"Be pleased to be ready at eight! I will bring my wife here—all the others will be at the station; and I will answer for your villa! I have Count Mohrendorf's orders!"

Here was the first problem of Life brought to the lonely American girl by her legal rank of Princess. It was no matter of a mere puppet show!

The brave American girl was sobbing alone in her room as the two men were whirled away through the gardens, where the lemon and orange now gleamed green and golden on the trees.

And, she was weighed down with the presage of disaster.

But the departing men saw none of the beauties of this lover's retreat!

They were gloomily silent, and each of them sadly recalled the beautiful, glowing girl-wife, a human blossom in the ardor of her nineteen years!

Her exquisite form; the bright, fearless face, with its aureole of golden hair; the tender blue eyes, like vio-

lets dashed with the honey-dew of the early summer; the rosebud lips, eager to taste the golden cup of Life and Love; the witching music of her flute-like voice—and, the wifely love and womanly faith shining out as she stood before them there, with her graceful arms crossed upon her heaving bosom.

Michael Obranovitch had coldly watched the passion play of the social sham at Nice for a long twenty years—and he sighed to recall how many fresh young hearts had failed there by the curved shores of the white-crested, blue, unanswering sea!

“Woman’s life harvest—blasted hopes, broken idols—the gleanings of her autumn fields, is only tears and sighs!” he murmured.

And yet, he recalled the dignified bravery of this young Star of the West—the quick decision, the steadfast faith in her three strange counselors! It was to him a new revelation of womanhood!

“Perhaps there is a lion heart yet to be awakened, under the gentle billows of that white bosom. If she should be strong as well as true—if she should be able to lean upon herself in this, her hour of trial—this gallant child of the far-away mountain city—then, she may be the victor, after all! She may not yield up her buttressed gold for this desperate libertine to shower upon the painted Aspasias of the gutters of the Riviera! To conquer him—and be a Princess indeed—that would be the heroic victory of a brave womanhood!”

When the morning of the second day broke, the gilded train of flunkies in the Villa Amati only knew that the Princess Zastrow had departed with Madame Obranovitch for a peep at the enchanted lake where beautiful Bellagio divides the sparkling crystal of Como. It was an innocent deceit, for they were merely luxurious time-servers.

The careful Consul-General had sent up a dozen of his secret agents to watch the exterior of the princely villa, where the Baron Serge Mohrendorf smiled sadly as he answered Prince Zastrow’s lover-like telegrams. They ceased at last, for Paul, happy in Vienna with the seeming accomplishing of his designs with the crafty Kalomine, had easily consoled himself with the

news that his wife had departed for a “petite tour de campagne” with Madame Obranovitch!

“Et pourquoi, non?”

There was the bewitching Racowitzza, the last adored Magyar nightingale, and the wild-hearted Countess Pahlen, supping “en petite comité” with the two conspirators, where sparkling wine and wicked wit—where stolen kisses and mutual sighs—told of the sweetness of the passing hour!

The panther’s feet had led Prince Paul, a riotous young Bacchus, back to his under world!

But, even the reckless Zastrow would have started up in dismay had he known that his girl-wife was kneeling, for the first time in her life, before the jeweled icons and the anointed altar of the Russian church; that she was in far-away Dresden, near the exquisite woman whose life he had wrecked, and that she had already held in her arms the fatherless babe of Marie Kriloff—an innocent harvest of sweet and unforgotten sin!

And, though she, too, was in the panther’s claws, the young Princess of the Golden West was safe in God’s hands; and there were black shadows stealing along in the somber shades which hid Paul Zastrow’s double life from his millionaire bride—black, avenging shadows which fell darkly across the silvered face of this happy honeymoon, and the veiled goddess Fortuna stood menacingly beside him, her hand ready to strike! The cruel game of cross purposes in High Life was on—a battle to the death!

Princess Clara Zastrow had made the transit of Lombardy in a trance of expectant wonder, and when Mont Cenis’s gloomy bosom had been traversed, her eyes rested in delight upon the awful majesty of the wintry Alps.

Her innocent heart was stirred in a wild unrest, for though Madame Obranovitch lavished every womanly tenderness upon her, she could see the wild pathos of the Russian priest’s eyes as he murmured his prayers in his forced calm!

The great silver-crested peaks smiled down upon her, lit up with God’s awful rose of dawn, and her half-

forgotten childhood's days came back in a flood of tears, as she murmured: "My far-away mountain home!"

And then, the mystic chords of affection led her back, in fancy, to the graves of the workaday father and mother, deep buried beneath the chilling Denver snows. For, alone in a strange land,—she missed their unselfish love!

When Basle was passed, and the train tore along through the Black Forest, still haunted with the ghosts of myriads of warriors slain, she knew that her companion would stay but one day in Dresden.

Neither Father Anastasius nor Madame Obranovitch had broken the brooding silence as to the real object of her own visit.

A hundred times she had read over the letter of that mighty Ambassador, Count Ivan Mohrendorf; and so, when Dresden was reached, the girl-bride, worn out with a thousand startling new visual impressions, dropped her head in the relief of an exhausting sleep, under the stately roof of the *Europaischer Hof*.

Princess Clara gazed with astonishment at the quaint old city when, next morning, conducted by Madame Obranovitch, she was driven to the Russian chapel.

Her companion led her aside, after the American princess had been greeted by the wondering Kazia Petroffsky, with the reverence due to one descended from the skies.

"I will come to take you away at eleven o'clock tonight, Princess," gravely said the Consul's wife. "Our railway carriage will be attached to the midnight train! Trust these good people even with your heart and soul! You are safe here, under God's roof! His Mighty Arm is shielding you!"

The lonely American bride knelt before the altar, an hour later, where, in the dim chapel, gloomy now, in the wintry shadows of northern Germany, she could only see the outlines of one woman's graceful form, shrouded in black; but, raising her own head later, after the echoes of Father Anastasius's deep voice had rolled away, lost in the dark groins of the chapel, Clara

Zastrow, in astonishment, saw Kazia Petroffsky enter, bearing in her arms a child of surpassing beauty.

The young Princess's eyes were filled with tears when the choir of men and boys triumphantly sang the triumphal finale of the impressive Greek Mass.

Lost in thought, she was lingering there alone, still on her bended knees, when Father Anastasius, clad in his robes, laid a kindly hand upon her shoulder.

"Rise! my daughter!" he said, with dignity, after blessing her with a majestic wave of his shriveled hand.

The old priest then led the wondering woman into the sacristy, where he seated her with a courtly hospitality.

"I have brought you here, my daughter," simply said the cleric, "that, in the peace of God's own house, you should look forward into your future life."

Handing her a letter sealed with Count Mohrendorf's crest, he then sank upon his knees, while the beautiful woman read the pages which opened up to her the leaves of the hitherto sealed Book of Fate. And now she felt the weight of the coronet of a Russian Princess—and the undying obligation of a loyal wife.

When the startled Princess Zastrow sprang up, as Anastasius rose and gazed inquiringly into her clear eyes, she murmured: "And this is, then, true, Father, that I must be baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church, and make my confession, before I have the legal right to the title of a Russian Princess?"

"Even so!" answered the priest. "Read that!" he solemnly said, handing her another letter. "I have here the two passports of yourself and your husband! He will only receive his own, from Consul Obranovitch; but you, my child, are to be duly protected, for you stand on the clouded threshold of the Woman's Kingdom."

Clara Zastrow's eyes filled with scalding tears when she handed back the Ambassador's private letter to the priest. "And Paul never told me?" she murmured.

The old man shook his head sadly.

"I am ready!" faltered the young Princess, after a pause.

"Then, kneel and pray to your God—our God—the one God of Time and Eternity! Him who was before Time began! There must, however, be a witness to the ceremony of baptism."

While Clara Zastrow knelt in prayer, the priest hastened away.

The young bride hardly lifted her head as a graceful woman silently followed Father Anastasius into the sacristy.

When the brief ceremony of baptism was over, Clara Zastrow gazed in wonder upon that sweet, pale face—a face whose haunting, wistful eyes touched her heart with an infinite compassion.

The priest, with a solemn dignity, then handed to the young American her own passport, and rapidly transcribed a certificate of baptism.

The mysterious White Lady had glided away, but through the open door Clara Zastrow could see the gentle stranger, kneeling there alone in the dim chapel.

"You will find a new name in the passport and certificate, my daughter," said the Father. "Olga is a holy name to us, and it is the law that you must receive one from the Greek Orthodox Church!"

While Kazia Petroffsky, with Marie's child in her arms, gazed in wonderment, the priest said simply:

He led the way in silence to the family apartments, passing through his private entrance when the solemn mystery was accomplished.

There were two stranger women kneeling side by side now, in a hallowed silence, until Father Anastasius approached them, saying: "Come, my chil-

"My child, He has heard it!" gravely said the priest, as he busied himself with the awful mystery of the communion.

And the child of gilded fortune then reverently bowed her head!

"Have you not made it to God this very morn-

"My confession?" timidly faltered the lonely stran-

ger, neophyte.

"Kneeling here before His Altar?" softly whispered An-

astasius.

"You will know each other as Marie and Olga, for this brief day, my daughters."

And Clara Zastrow started when she listened to the musical voice of the slender beauty, whose eyes were sadly fixed upon her child, now holding out its little arms to the pale mother, whose feet were seeking the Silent Land.

At a sign, Kazia Petroffsky led the White Lady away—for a hectic crimson now burned upon the delicate woman's wasted cheek.

"I shall speak only English to you," said Anastasius, dropping the French which had been their only available tongue in the constrained interview.

"You are now the Princess Zastrow, beyond all quibble of the law—no longer a mere defenseless wife, *de facto*; for, as your marriage was certified by the Russian Consul-General in New York, this ceremony of baptism, confirmation, confession, and communion enables me to make the legal entries in the register here! To-night, the Legation courier takes the original official certificates to Consul Obranovitch, and Serge Mohrendorf will send them on to his uncle. All this, after being spread upon the records of the Russian Embassy at Paris, will then be sent on to St. Petersburg. And now you are a legally vested Princess and—a protected Russian subject!"

"Strange man!" cried the American Princess. "Why have you brought me here to tell me all this?"

"Because it is God's work—because Ambassador Count Mohrendorf ordered me to protect you—and also for the sake of that dying woman and her fatherless child!"

"Speak!" cried Clara Zastrow, her whole soul now shining out in her gleaming eyes!

"Listen to my story!" gravely said Anastasius. "You have not yet seen your husband's mother?"

"Paul told me that she was traveling in the Urals—that we would meet after his youthful folly had been pardoned!" whispered the Princess.

"I have been saying masses for the last two weeks beside dear Prascovie Zastrow's coffin, where she lies

under the roses in the tomb at Fontainebleau!" solemnly said the priest.

"And—Paul knows this?" almost shrieked the girl-bride.

"He knows it not, my daughter!" said Anastasius, supporting her tottering form. "God has strangely chastised him! And before you know all—before he knows anything of his just punishment—there is a solemn duty to be done here! The Ambassador alone will communicate with Prince Paul Zastrow. Should any one prematurely warn him of aught of these happenings, then the Czar would simply erase him forever from the lists of our nobility! Only you can earn his pardon—only you, pure, innocent child of the church, can save him!"

And then, the burden of her husband's shame descended upon the innocent wife, linked to him until death.

It was a half an hour before Father Anastasius had finished a recital which left the Princess Olga Clara Zastrow doubly baptized with the chrism of a sorrow beyond words.

"Noble child—a Princess in every throb of her heart!" murmured Anastasius, as he left the room, quickly returning with a jewel casket and a sealed letter.

"Here is the last legacy of the noblest heart I ever knew!" cried Anastasius, his voice choked with sobs.

Princess Zastrow gazed, bewildered, at the magnificent jewels which met her gaze, as the priest reverently raised the lid of the casket.

"This, my daughter," sadly said Father Petroffsky, "is the last of the Princess Prascovie Zastrow's wasted fortune. She leaves this wealth to the dying woman here—the witness of your new birth in Christ—to support her, and—to make a small provision for that fatherless babe! Only you must tell this lonely Marie of the death of your husband's mother—that noble woman who sheltered me for years when a poor student at the Russian Embassy in London! For, if I give Marie this letter, there will be a motherless babe in this house to-night! It is a woman's work—and—the Ambassa-

dor bade me lay the sad burden upon you, in God's name!"

The beautiful American sprang to her feet and groped wildly at some elusive vision, while her whole soul spoke out in one agonizing cry:

"Paul! Paul!"

And Father Anastasius bared his head in a silent assent as he sprang to grasp that tottering form.

The secret of her husband's eccentric actions was clear at last! His innocent child was a living witness!

The stars were shining over Dresden, beaming down silently upon all the poor passion play of this weary world, when Marie Wraxine at last lifted her weary head!

For now she knew that Prascovie Zastrow would never fold her erring son to that loyal breast again.

It had been a mercy of deceit, which simply told her of the sudden death of her only friend.

The old priest had stilled Kazia's wailing at last, and he now stood watching the two women whose happiness had been wrecked by Paul Zastrow's brutal self-love.

"Paul! Paul!" sobbed the deserted Marie Wraxine, "Where is the shield of your honor! Who will care for my child?"

With a glance as bright and terrible as the gaze of an avenging angel, Clara Zastrow laid her soft hand on Marie's brow.

"Listen!" she whispered, in sweet, low accents which reached high Heaven. "I am an American woman—childless, and rich! Father Anastasius hears my vow! As God is my judge, I will care for your child! He shall be nurtured as princes are!"

And then, with her trembling fingers clinging to the firm, white hand of her sister in sorrow, Marie Wraxine fell into the merciful eclipse of a shuddering swoon. The black eclipse of a husband's shame had blotted out the light of the silver honeymoon forever!

There was no sound heard that night save the joyous babble of the rosy babe in the darkened house where Father Anastasius waited with the Princess Zastrow for the carriage which was to bear her away.

At the first rattle of the wheels, Clara stole in and kissed that white face, now grown so sacred to her in its unspeakable sorrow. She pressed the babe to her own virginal bosom and then knelt for Father Anastasius's blessing.

"Go! my daughter!" said the rapt old man. "God in your heart! Heaven in your soul!"

And the American Princess left a blessing upon the house as she departed, for the happiness of a better world than this shone in her martyr eyes! Her last glances rested upon the pale-faced beauty clasping to her breast that nameless child!

A week later, flushed with the wave of Life, secretly joying in a brilliant social success, the gay-hearted Prince Paul Zastrow leaped from his carriage in front of the Villa Amati.

The great doors were thrown open to the man who had so easily achieved the mastery of millions with the glamour of his eyes and the honey of his tongue. The bridegroom was in a particularly buoyant mood, swimming now on the very top wave of fortune.

For, he had treasured up in his breast the telegram from the victorious Director Alexandre Kalomine:

"Full papers will be mailed, in the Legation bag, to Paris next week. Have practically effected the whole transaction! Au revoir on the Neva." The pardon gave him a new birth, the rebaptism into the Russian aristocracy by dint of his wife's millions. He saw himself now a shining star again!

"Delightful!" murmured Prince Paul, as the solemn butler removed his master's royal furs. "This will give me first a little trip, solus, to Paris! And—la belle Racowitza will be there! I shall have a fortnight of dumb-show play with Mohrendorf over the little details, and then—a grand *diner de cérémonie* will seal his tongue. The moment I get my pardon, I can send Schlitz away to hunt up my Lady Mother! Schlitz is a sharp-nosed devil of a valet! And—I can quiet Madame Mère down after a bit of emotional drama! Bah! All women are the same! The game is in my own hands at last!" He could see himself once more at the Winter Palace, a risen social star!

But, a sudden flush reddened Prince Zastrow's cheeks as he saw his girl-wife, robed in the deepest black, standing silently awaiting him at the end of the great *salle de reception*!

Strange to say, the Baron Serge Mohrendorf and the stolid Consul Obranovitch were also in the room, both rising formally at his approach; while the Consul's wife sat, with her eyes fixed upon the marble Niobe, who had stirred no step in welcome of her princely husband. Zastrow's face darkened!

"What means all this mummery?" angrily cried the maddened Prince, as he sprang toward his wife.

"I am here," coldly said the resolute Consul Obranovitch, "to notify you, sir—with Baron Mohrendorf as my official witness—that your passport has been recalled by the Government, and canceled!"

"*Bien obligé!*" sneered Prince Paul, as he sprang aside and rang a silver gong with an angry clash. "The carriage of Monsieur!" he shouted—and then, the fires of hell shone out in his eyes as the two men rose and silently passed him, with a simple inclination of the head.

Paul Zastrow started back as, on his approach to his silent bride, she recoiled a step.

"And you? Are you mad, too?" he shouted, forgetting all prudence.

"Paul!" coldly said his American wife, "before we go farther I wish to ask you the story of Marie Kriloff!"

"So!" growled the young debauchee. "They are juggling you with the history of that bit of light flesh! It's easy to see the bourgeois blood of Madame la Princess Zastrow!"

"You mistake, sir!" defiantly answered his wife. "I am an American—not a Russian—Princess!" Do you know where that lady is?"

"I neither know nor care!" yelled Paul; for he saw a golden fortune now slipping from his grasp.

"Who has worked this hell's caldron up?" He gazed wrathfully at Madame Obranovitch. The lady's glance was averted.

"Will you care for Marie Wraxine's child?" res-

olutely demanded the Princess Clara, advancing upon her recreant husband with glowing eyes.

"Let the brat find another protector!" sneered Paul, throwing himself wearily into a chair.

"It has found another one!" proudly said the wife, whose breaking heart was now buoyed up with a woman's pity for the helpless babe. "I will be its guardian, for the mother is dying!"

And then, Paul Zastrow cast aside the mask!

"Good God! Marie dying!" he faltered, as he buried his head in his hands.

There was a horrid silence, until, in a strangely altered voice, the young wife said:

"Paul! Tell me, then, of your mother! Where is she? I will go to her! She was a friend of this dying woman—and she has provided until now for this fatherless child!"

Paul Zastrow leaped up, his face whitened to ashes.

"I know not!" he growled. "Lurking around Dresden somewhere, I suppose! She has perhaps poisoned your mind against me! She is a soft-hearted fool!"

"Paul! Paul!" sobbed his wife, her heart melted with an unspeakable anguish. She forgot all the Ambassador's injunctions in her yearning sorrow. "Two weeks ago, the Princess Prascovie Zastrow was laid away in her tomb at Fontainebleau! She died in the Russian Embassy, and, Count Mohrendorf——"

But then, with a wild glance at Madame Obranovitch, Paul Zastrow threw up his hands and rushed, in a frenzy of despair, from the room!

In vain the Consul and Baron Serge, watching in the corridor, strove to detain the seeming madman!

It was only the watchful servants who followed their master out into the gloom of the dying day, while the two men sadly returned to the drawing-room. And, then, as her guilty husband fled, Clara Zastrow fell senseless in a deathlike swoon!

There were flitting lights around the Villa Amati all the livelong night, for the young bride struggled long between life and death.

The hastily summoned physicians gazed blankly at

each other, for the honeymoon had ended in an undertone of tragedy!

When the day broke, Prince Paul Zastrow still sat alone in a room in the Casino.

His face was flushed with drink as he muttered: "Kinsky's evidence must yet turn the scale! This girl's money shall buy my pardon! I will go to Paris! Mohrendorf must aid me! As for Clara— Bah! She is only a child! I can manage her easily. My Lady Tiger Cat has claws, it seems! Never mind— when I get her to Russia, and her money in my grasp, she shall cool that hot temper on the icy Neva! Our dames are no frozen prudes, and I shall ride over my enemies on golden wheels! I'll get away to Paris! The Racowitza is there already! Schlitz can follow on with my luggage!"

He murmured a few directions to his watching valet, and then drained the brandy bottle; for, all the long night the coward had fled the echoes of the voice of his dying mother, the fondly loyal woman whom he had denied. He could hear her still crying "Paul! Paul!"

CHAPTER XIV.

"JE M' EN VAIS!"

While all the golden swim of Nice wondered at the absence of the Prince and Princess Zastrow from the Grand Bal d'Hiver, the husband and wife were already separated by a gulf deeper than the sea.

Even on the Riviera, there is a shadowy "Mrs. Grundy," and much marveled the Golden Horde, that the Prince Paul Zastrow was absent from the Villa Amati, when his girl-bride was known to be hovering between life and death.

The vanished husband was replaced a week later by the sunken-eyed Father Anastasius Petroffsky, whose cadaverous face put to flight the resolute old Princess Crayekowski, who had determined to solve the mystery of the interrupted honeymoon.

But, at the lodge gates, the butler courteously answered all inquiry, and received the avalanche of flowers and cartes de condolence.

He parried the questions of all curious intermeddlers with the blunt sangfroid of a Sergeant of Sappers.

It was, after all, "an ill wind that blew nobody good!"

For, the Marchesa Della Torre and Count Schweidnitz, of the Austrian Chevaliers (d'Industrie), led the cotillon instead of "*la belle Americaine*," and the stately Serge Mohrendorf.

Time waits for neither man nor maid at Nice, "*en saison*"; and so, the merry-go-round went on gayly! *Vogue la galère!*

It is true there had been curious murmurs as to the disappearance from the Vesuvian bay of a beautiful orange girl, in the past years, but too familiar to the officers of the foreign fleets at Naples, a willful beauty who was last seen with Prince Porlonia, an Italian Crœsus, and, "headed northward."

But, as Madame la Marchesa was duly vouched for by the Italian Consul (Porlonia's banking agent at Nice), the Marchesa was accepted on faith, and the cotillon was vowed a success.

Not even the boldest dared to question Consul Alexis Obranovitch, or his sad-eyed wife, for this grave matrimonial pair seemed to have mounted guard over the Villa Amati, where a dozen gens d'armes now walked the bounds, to insure silence.

And even the vivacious French physicians admitted that no one knew aught of the social cataclysm save the four Russian Sisters, nurses of the sickroom, brought by the stern-eyed priest from Dresden. And these wary Muscovites merely watched their invalid, and told their beads—and—nothing more!

It is true that the promotion of Baron Serge Mohrendorf to be First Secretary of the Russian Embassy at Paris, fully accounted for his own disappearance, the orders of the White Czar not admitting of delays, "*pour prendre congé*."

And so, the handsome, frank-faced Mohrendorf was

gone, and as for the ladies, who knew him to be the sole heir of one of the richest of the old Russian nobles, “Aye, they loot the tear doun fa’, for Jock o’ Hazel-dean!”

And as, providentially, at this time, a “duel sanglante” occurred between two amatory married cavaliers, the Baron de Slickwitz and the Count de Gobemouche, all society now turned and fell upon that demure little sinner, Ma’amselle Fifi Chiffon, a première of the grand opera ballet, who was the tempting prey of these rival social lions.

Only on one point were the warring married beauties of Nice agreed—viz., the uselessness of these social desperadoes straying so far from the well-stocked game preserves of the salons. And the social drama of the Villa Amati was soon forgotten in the mad rush of Pleasure!

It was only Pauline, the lustrous-eyed Parisian maid, who was the quartermaster-general of Princess Zastrow’s toilettes, who could have solved the mystery.

For had not Schlitz, the bodyservant and Leporello of Don Juan Zastrow, written her a letter from Paris which knitted even closer the bonds linking the hearts of the adroit valet and the rapacious soubrette.

“There is something in this, for Adolph and I,” smiled Pauline, as she read the story of the voyage to Paris.

Only Pauline knew that the Prince Zastrow had waited impatiently at the Grand Hotel Louvre, at Marseilles, for the arrival of his sly German valet, with all the luggage needed for a brilliant Parisian entrée.

“Ciel!” sneered Pauline, who proposed now to make a joint purse with Adolph Schlitz. “They are a queer couple. I thought that the Prince and Baron Serge were going away to fight a duel over the three days’ disappearance of my golden-haired mistress! Bah! Les hommes sout tous infidèles! Here is my young master hidden away at the Hotel Choiseul, in Paris, and—very strangely—la belle Racowitz also appears at the same place! He is surely crazy—stark crazy—like all Russian princes! Tiens! Adolph will watch him! But—my proud mistress! Where did

she hide herself away those three days? If I could only find out, then I would be her ruler—just as surely as Adolph now controls the wild young master! A pretty Prince—a pretty Princess!"

But, although the vivacious soubrette stole away that night to grace a petit din r with Monsieur Antoine, the rich wine merchant, she never knew the secret of that flying trip via Mont Cenis!

And yet, the pale woman lying in the darkened room in the Villa Amati knew now that she had lived and loved—that her idol had been thrown down from its pedestal.

It was two long weeks before she was well enough to read the autograph letters of His Excellency Count Mohrendorf! The anxious words of the old Ambassador were few, but they touched the orphan Princess's heart.

For, Mohrendorf frankly owned to the sending of Father Anastasius to watch over her, and promised that the Consul and his wife should shield her.

"It may be necessary, my dear Princess," wrote Count Ivan, "that you should seek the shelter of this Embassy to protect your legal rights. I am in daily communication—or rather conflict—with your husband, who seems to have lost all his mental self-control. I have withheld his passport, while yours has been already fully registered in St. Petersburg; and you will receive all the honors and protection due to your rank! You are free to go to Russia; you are entitled to a speedy presentation at Court—and—alas, your husband is not! Pray be guided by Father Anastasius; and you will regularly receive my letters and telegrams through Consul Obranovitch. I have the official control of Prince Paul's status while he is a denizen of France; and, I venture to say, that, after you have made a second sad journey to Dresden, that I advise you then to close up the Villa Amati and come to Paris, where you may choose a dignified home. My honor and the orders of the Czar prevent me telling you all! Prince Paul is here, scheming with a desperate cabal, who are the sycophants of one Grand Duke whom I will not name! But, I have the Emperor's

own orders to countenance and protect you; if necessary, I will come to Nice and escort you to Paris—myself—with Madame Obranovitch. I counsel you for the present to shun all fashionable society! Serge has told me all! With one or two exceptions, your entourage is not worthy of your present rank, or your own noble nature."

Two weeks later, the Princess Zastrow was seated alone in her drawing-room, gazing out upon the leaden sea, upon whose lonely waste she now saw no silver sail freighted with new hopes!

She shuddered to think of all the sorrows that the dying year had brought to her!

There was no denying the mad recklessness which had seized upon the recreant Prince Paul!

Clara Zastrow knew nothing of the warfare à l'outrance, now carried on between a clan headed by the Grand Duke Anatole, backed by the Necker syndicate, Director Kalomine, and the mad young debauchee, with the stern-eyed Ambassador at Paris, secretly upheld by Monsieur de Giers, and, acting under the orders of the manly Czar, doomed so soon to lay down his weary head upon an early death-bed.

Some malicious hand had been busied with her affairs since her husband's departure.

For, clippings of Parisian journals duly falling in by mail, "thick as leaves in Vallombrosa," told of the wild social career of Prince Paul Zastrow.

From the Jockey Club to the coulisses, from the gilded orgies of the gambling clubs and degenerate restaurants, to the dueling ground, the "mad Russian" was trailing his baleful way—a meteor on the midnight blackness of the wintry Parisian sky.

And, strange to say, the reckless husband had made the mistake of his life in trying to bully his American wife!

For his drafts were all promptly dishonored by the Princess Clara's bankers; and the Parisian usurers—lending at forty per cent. and a commission—began to tremble for their profits.

But, money or no money, la Racowitza daily rode

gayly on the honor seat of Prince Paul's four-in-hand, and a wild clientèle had gathered around him.

The reckless Paul Zastrow found that he had encountered a sterner nature than his own, and he growled in surprise when he gazed on the protested drafts.

"Only in Russia can I conquer her; but, by Heaven, I will soon frighten her into coming here! Then, I can get money on her credit! She will pay,—sooner or later!"

Father Anastasius gazed upon the deserted young wife with an infinite pity on the day when he handed her a short telegram from Dresden.

It was sadly pathetic in its brevity.

And Clara Zastrow's beautiful blue eyes were filled with tears as she read the simple words—

"Je m'en vais! Marie."

"Send for the Consul!" resolutely said Paul Zastrow's heart-broken wife. "I will be ready to leave in an hour! We must have a special train. This side of Life, at least, is real—sickness, sorrow, sin, and the shadow of Death—even if Love be but a poor sham fool's gold—the deadly mirage of Life's desert!"

The Legation courier was galloping into Nice before Pauline was busied with Madame Zastrow's simple traveling outfit.

"Black—only black!" sternly said the Princess Clara, as Pauline held up some dazzling Worth finery.

"And, I accompany Madame?" stealthily queered the soubrette.

At last, the secret was to be a sweet morsel for future golden hours of pecuniary nibbling.

"I will take only the Sisters with me! You will remain here—subject to Consul Obranovitch in every way!" said the mistress, eyeing her closely.

The Frenchwoman's face faded into a slaty hue of speechless rage; but, en revanche, there remained perhaps a week of quiet flirtations with Monsieur Antoine, and, little by little, Pauline was making her golden nest.

When the party had departed, Pauline Duprez burst into a storm of tears, as Madame Obranovitch's sturdy

housekeeper installed herself in charge of the Villa during the absence of the Princess.

"And so, Monsieur le Consul will sleep here?" snarled Pauline.

"*Sans doute!*" calmly said the robust bourgeois. "He is responsible for all to your mistress now!"

And so, Pauline Duprez knew nothing of the race against Death; for, swift as the whirring wheels of the train were, the grim destroyer stood ready at Dresden, whetting his scythe to cut the silver cord of Marie Wraxine's days.

The disappointed soubrette's only revenge was to extract a long-treasured hundred-franc note from the miserly old Princess Crayekowski in return for the meager information that the American Princess "had fled to parts unknown."

But the Crayekowski gnashed her yellowed teeth later, when she discovered that Madame Obranovitch, the strange Russian priest, and four Muscovite Sisters were all partners of that strange hegira.

"All the Americans are crazy—and, some of the Russians!" sagely decided the baffled Princess Crayekowski, as she returned to her cherished baccarat, having worn out every other human wickedness in the world, save lying!

And now, a past mistress of that most time-honored art, she recouped herself for her money thrown away, by inventing foul tales about the American Princess, which were duly wafted by the children of Belial from Paris to St. Petersburg. It was a grim welcome to Russian society!

On this very day of the second departure for Dresden, Prince Paul Zastrow, fierce and red-eyed, sullenly obeyed an official order to present himself at the Russian Embassy.

There was a "*tir au pigeons*" at Asnières, and la Racowitzá had bidden him to a petit déjeuner à quatre, with a debauched royalty visiting Paris incognito, and a queenly Italian diva, a glittering Delilah at whose feet many princes sued—an endless chain of fools!

But the stern directress of Count Ivan Mohrendorf's personal letter was backed up by the presence

of a very determined-looking attaché—a new importation from Krim Tartary, sent on to Paris for a judicious social “frottement.”

With a pardonable discretion, the reckless Paul dressed himself, en “toilet de duel,” and suddenly entered the Count’s private cabinet, gracefully courteous and gravely defiant.

There was a frosty glare in the old Ambassador’s eyes when Prince Paul, bowing stiffly, referred to the presence of the Baron Serge Mohrendorf. “You are here, mon Prince, to face a very grave issue! Be pleased to drop your useless bravado!” coldly said the Ambassador.

“You have vainly demanded of me the location of the resting-place of your sainted mother—la Princesse Prascovie Zastrow!” continued the Count, while Serge Mohrendorf fixed a steady eye upon the prodigal.

“Too late—all too late! I have learned by the confession of my rascal Baptiste that your denial of this noble woman, the mother who loved you, broke her heart! She died in my arms—here—in this very room!”

Prince Paul sprang to his feet, livid in a deadly rage; but the old man’s sternly pointing finger quelled him.

“You would have hoodwinked your golden-hearted American wife until you could have covered up your past crimes!”

Suddenly, Paul’s eyes rested upon Serge Mohrendorf, with a ferocious delight.

“It’s a damnable lie, you old dotard!” he hissed. “Here is one of your blood to answer me!”

“Stop! Serge!” cried Count Ivan, in a voice of thunder. “I will not let my heir, the son of my heart, fight with a criminal fugitive, an alleged thief, a seducer, and a notorious blackguard!”

He rang a bell with violence.

A resolute secretary appeared.

“Bid the police await my call in the anteroom! Gregor!” quietly said the Count. “Ask the Second Secretary to be ready to go to the Bureau de Police

and give a criminal in charge! You may arm yourself also, and wait there, without."

The old soldier was not to be dismayed by the young bully's blustering.

Paul Zastrow had retreated into a corner, his hand straying into his bosom.

"Drop that hand!" rang out Serge's command, as cold as steel. "If you move, I will shoot you down!"

"Now, listen!" slowly said Count Ivan, in a voice which froze the marrow of Zastrow's bones. "I have a dispatch that the General Baron Michel Wraxine died three days ago. He died crazy, in an asylum at Kief! This is morally your second murder, one executed with all the crafty self-protection of a fiend. But it gives you, now, the opportunity to legally recognize and adopt your own child! General Wraxine's death lifts the ban! The mother is dying—how, or where, it matters not to you! Your destiny is in your own hands! Will you adopt this child—the son of Marie Kriloff? The law enables you to give it your name! I will give you five minutes to reflect!"

And then, with a quick motion, Count Ivan threw open the door, admitting the fierce-looking attaché whose fighting exterior had cowed Zastrow's nerve—at last weakened by absinthe and midnight debauchery.

There was a ghastly silence as Count Mohrendorf gazed at the repeater which had rung the hour of the assault on the Grivitzka redoubt.

At a mute signal, the stranger retired, and Mohrendorf, hollow-voiced, muttered:

"Your answer, sir!"

"A thousand times, NO!" yelled Paul Zastrow. "It is a conspiracy to defeat my legal reinstatement!"

The crafty scoundrel thought, buoyed up with false hopes of Kalomine's last letter—resting now on his bosom: "For one hundred thousand roubles more I can carry the day!"

And, the desperate man had gone, in despair, to the usurers, mortgaging to them his entire marital claims.

The money had been telegraphed on already to Kalomine.

"I must kill this fellow Serge—he has betrayed me,"

mused Paul; "and the Grand Duke must help me now. As for la belle Americaine—she will now pay the half of her fortune to get rid of me. She has bought her title cheaply!"

Ivan Mohrendorf read these murderous thoughts in the villain's stormy face.

"Be it so! You have sealed your doom! I shall now send Baron Serge Mohrendorf on to the Neva to acquaint Monsieur de Giers with this whole affair! The Baron goes under an escort. Dare to approach him and—you will be shot down like a mad wolf. You are not to darken this door again! If you do, I will give my servants orders to eject you! I will see that the poor orphan whom you tricked into a cruel marriage never brings her money to the Continent, to be reduced to your thievish possession! I now give you my orders. See that you obey them! You are to stay in Paris, under the surveillance of the secret police, until the Emperor gives his final answer as to my actions! Dare but to try to leave this city, and you will be dragged off to La Force! As for your personal movements, you may wallow as you will! And now, I tell you that I throw the mantle of secrecy over your mother's tomb! You will never find it! She was buried under another name! As to your passport, here it is, sent back officially canceled!"

With a nervous energy, the Ambassador tore the returned document into tatters, and then contemptuously tossed the fragments into the blazing fire of vine-roots.

"Go, sir! The first Russian agent who dares to give you a passport will end his days a slave in Siberia! As for your loyal wife, dare but to approach her in anger, and you will quickly wear a felon's load of chains. She is under my protection—my ward by the order of the Czar!"

The old noble threw wide open the door of his cabinet, sternly calling in the police. He pointed to the cowering Zastrow. And the two attachés listened as the old man's voice rang out in solemn tones, as grave as a death sentence:

"Messieurs!" he said. "Look to him—swindler,

braggart, would-be duelist, disgraced fugitive, proscribed Russian, degraded noble, and—a criminal deserter! He is not to leave Paris, and—when I wish him arrested, I will notify the Commissaire! Do not lose him from sight!"

The agents de police bowed in silence, and their leader roughly shook up Paul Zastrow's arm.

"Filez-tout droite!" he growled, as the disgraced adventurer slunk out of the open door, with an impassive gendarme at either side.

In an hour, Serge Mohrendorf was on his way to Dresden direct, while Paul Zastrow, a raging hell in his heart, learned that two men, in plain clothes, followed his every movement, their eyes glued upon his form, where the bowed shoulders already showed the weight of disgrace and shame. They only waited to arrest him and drag him away.

And yet, in the society of la Racowitzza, he forgot that he was now under the ban—a mere human wolf.

In far-away Dresden, Kazia Petroffsky sat, awed into a chastened silence, by the bed whereon the beautiful Marie Kriloff lay suffering in silence, her thin, white hand plucking at the coverlid!

Ah! Never on those pale lips would a happy smile play again; there was only a gleam in the wistful dark eyes when, through the open door, the carol of the child could be heard.

And, as the long hours drifted away, the good housewife knew the silent question of those sadly shining eyes, feebly turned toward the window!

"Would they never come?"

For, already, in the corners of the room, there was a gathering gloom—a thrilling silence—and wandering airs of heaven stole in, as if some invisible presence lingered around the bed of pain!

The White Lady was fast drifting away to the echoless shore.

And, even the stolid, watchful German physician paused without the sick-room, on his departure, to sadly shake his bearded head and brush away a tear.

"It is the murder of the soul—this sad life ending." muttered Dr. Oberweiler—for he had divined the Sor-

rows crown of sorrows in the presence of that prattling babe, and the agonized cry: "Paul! Paul! Come to me! Come to me but once—only once again! My God—to leave my child alone in this dark world!" It was a loving woman's ultimate martyrdom!

The snows were gayly sparkling in their silver sheen and mantling the blackened slate roofs of the Altstadt, when the good Anastasius left the Princess Clara at the Europaischer Hof, in Dresden.

It was near midnight when Doctor Hugo Oberweiler had finished his confidential report.

"Simply a broken heart," he concluded. "Arme Engelschön frau! There is nothing left for my art now! It is for you, Herr Pastor, to soothe the parting hour! Only, if you wish her to live a few wretched hours longer, let there be no shock! And, above all, do not take the child away from her!"

Doctor Oberweiler kindly drew the young Princess aside.

Both of them were ignorant of the whole heart history of the dying Marie—and yet, the veteran physician and the young millionairess saw that the prattling babe was at once the enigma and its solution.

"Send the priest and the Sisters up with the courier!" said the Doctor. "I will be at her bedside early in the morning! And, she shall have a mercy sleep of a few hours! When she wakes, let her find only your bright face by her bedside—and then—stay with her to the last! Remember—keep the child with her; it is the last tie that binds the fluttering soul! And, as to Madame Obranovitch, let her remain in quiet with the priest's wife! No new faces! It would only alarm her!"

It was two o'clock on the morrow when Marie Wraxine awoke to see the loving face of the Princess Zastrow shining down upon her!

The White Lady gave a gentle sigh, and then, her feeble hand sought the grasp of her younger sister in sorrow.

The beautiful dark eyes melted in a glow of tenderness, for before her, stood Anastasius Petroffsky, holding the rosy babe in his protecting arms.

The dying woman strove to speak, but a hand, light as a roseleaf, pressed her brow, and Clara Zastrow's lips kissed into silence the murmurs of the feeble mother, struggling there with Azrael.

The long hours wore slowly away; the darkling shadows fell upon tower and dome, hiding the cruel stone-fanged streets, and mantling the peasant's hut, the burgher's happy home, and the glittering halls of the children of the Golden Calf.

A calm-faced Sister silently moved around the sick-room, whenever Marie Wraxine stirred, and the steadfast Princess Zastrow sat there in a reclining chair, casting up the accounts of the dying year!

She knew nothing save that the Legation courier was sending hourly telegrams to Paris, and silently bringing the Count Mohrendorf's answers to Father Anastasius, a watcher as true to his trust as the Roman sentinel who died before the gate of Pompeii.

At last, she realized the fatal precipitancy with which she had hurled herself out of her own beloved land into another social world, at the beck of an insidious Prince Charming! A brief, lovelit dream—a sad awakening—a self-immolation—for the hollow honors of a title.

Gazing at the pale, proud face of the sufferer, she wondered in what subtle mesh of lying promises she had been entangled!

"Alas! Poor Marie!" sighed the American Princess. "If you have shared the sweetness of the darling sin, the bitterness of the cup is yours alone! The Woman's Kingdom of the blasted life and the broken heart!"

And herself! She had passed the parting of the ways! She stood now alone, a stranger in a strange land!

Lightly laden with barren honors, as yet, an alien to Russia—and—expatriated from America!

The snares and pitfalls of international marriage now rose up before her!

Paul! Her reckless husband!

She shuddered and put her hands before her eyes, to hide his haunting image!

For, whatever tie had bound him to the dying

woman, lying there but faintly breathing now, lingering reluctant on death's threshold, she knew for a truth that her reckless husband had meanly denied his noble-hearted mother, only to get a quick control of his bride's wealth to minister to his headlong thirst of every degraded pleasure!

Forgetting that the fortune-hunters of her own nation might have trapped her even in her own land, she looked at man as her typical foe!

And yet, one generous impulse thrilled her heart! The courtly old Ambassador seemed familiar to her already in Baron Serge's faithful descriptions.

His letters breathed a fatherly tenderness, and he had known and loved her husband's golden-hearted mother—the woman who had opened her arms to this repentant Marie and this helpless child!

There was the sacred deposit of jewels for which the Princess Clara had already deposited their full price with Father Anastasius as a fund to assuage the sufferings of the mother and provide for the prattling babe. The last offerings of a noble heart!

Surely this old Count Mohrendorf must be a man among men, for he had solemnly warned her to pay for none of her husband's dissolute orgies, and had directed her not to bring any of her funds to Europe to be reduced to the possession of her spendthrift lord and master.

The prompt and delicate protection of her rank and married rights touched her lonely heart.

And she could not deny the manly and broad-minded loyalty of the Baron Serge!

For, while the stalwart young noble had carefully instructed her as to her rights, he had chivalrously refrained from lifting the veil clouding Paul Zastrow's past! And yet, he had been as manly and inflexible in her defense as a brother of the blood!

Oppressed with her mournful introspection, Clara Zastrow stole out into the room where Father Anastasius sat reading, in a low whisper, the prayers for the dying.

In an agony of unrest, she begged for immediate counsel!

"Wait, my daughter," he solemnly said. "God will lead—and you are walking in the right path! Baron Serge comes here to superintend the sad formalities, and I am to conduct you then to Paris, where the Ambassador will both guide and guard you!"

And so, comforted at heart, the American Princess went back to her vigil of love.

On this very night, his nature sunk in a nervous despair, the disgraced Prince Paul Zastrow moodily sat in a dark corner of la Racowitz'a drawing-room in Paris.

Though the open door of the *salle-à-manger* he could hear the laughter of wanton women, the clink of yellow gold, the hoarse voices of the players, and the odor of wine and crushed roses hung heavy in this modern Phryne's bower.

It was truly a "*mauvais quart d'heure!*"

For, Paul knew now of the resolute daily hounding of the two men in black!

With a bitter sneer, he realized at last that only the murky atmosphere of the *déclassé* was open to him now! A genuine fear possessed him, for the brave old Ambassador's fiery courage had broken his nerve!

His warring soul was filled with a stormy rage.

Only one memory he dared not face! His mother, loyal, brave-hearted, and true!

"Dame!" he cried, "I should have told her all! I believe that she loved me! But, no—there was Marie hovering ever between us! And so, that old wolf Wraxine is dead! *Tant mieux!* It clears the field! But, the story of Marie—and this child! Who the devil could have told my stubborn American wife! My mother? No! She never saw even Clara's face! Some enemy—perhaps some woman who angrily remembers an old amourette! They are all the same—these women! Here's the Racowitz'a! Once that she knows I am penniless, she will turn me into the street!"

He drained a glass of brandy before two ideas emerged from the chaos of his mind! "Kalomine must help me, or else, I will have to betray them all! Can it be that the Grand Duke Anatole has failed! And the

last—the sweetest draught of revenge! When I have ruined Kalomine, unless he keeps his faith, I will waylay this Serge Mohrendorf, and force him to fight me—yes, by Heavens! a duel à l'Americaine, in the very streets! He is rashly brave, and—I have my Western armes de chasse! It will break old Mohrendorf's heart, and one that Serge is killed, I will easily tame this Western tiger-cat—later, when Serge is dead!"

In an hour, Paul Zastrow's voice rang out again, high above the bacchanalian chorus, and he was in a reckless mood that night when the Racowitza begged for the "rivière" of diamonds which she had so greatly admired in the Palais Royal that day!

Blind and foolish was the wine-maddened Samson who strained the Magyar Delilah to his breast as he consented! He little knew that the crafty valet, the smug Adolph Schlitz, was pocketing his own comfortable commissions from the wild Magyar for each successive robbery of their victim.

And, though the usurers loudly protested the next day, they finally cashed Prince Paul's draft for one hundred thousand francs upon the Baron Alexandre Kalomine, Director-General of the Imperial Bank of St. Petersburg.

"He will have an abundance," gloated the Jews, "when he rejoins the millionaire bride at Nice—and—then, we shall shave him—to the bone!"

And yet, the Sons of Israel would have groaned in terror had they known that Paul Zastrow had deliberately forged the letter of Kalomine authorizing the draft, at twenty days.

But, la Racowitza laughed in her lover's arms that night as he clasped the "rivière" of brilliants upon her ivory neck, and Paul muttered: "Sixty thousand for this, leaves me still forty thousand to suffice until Clara surrenders, or else she settles! Perhaps she will buy her 'liberty,' for she is a Princess, 'quand même.'"

There was a little rift of sunlight in the gray, wintry morning clouds hovering over Dresden when Kazia Petroffsky, wild-eyed, awoke the Princess Clara Zastrow from a troubled sleep.

Words were useless! The priest's wife brought the fatal message in her despairing glances.

And, in an instant, awed by the presence of death, the deserted wife knelt by the bedside of the deserted partner of Paul Zastrow's dastardly flight from Odessa.

Grave-faced Doctor Hugo Oberweiler, at the head of the bed, stood apparently as sternly composed as when he walked among his wounded while the French shells shrieked over the field hospital in the charnel of Gravelotte.

But, his eyes were filled with unbidden tears.

The American girl never noticed that the windows were all opened, and the cool morning air filled the room.

Through the open door, Clara could hear the sobbing of Helène Obranovitch, who had shared the vigils of the last night.

And now, a divine compassion was reflected in Anastasius Petroffsky's eyes, when he raised the cross before the dying woman's eyes.

The young wife leaned over the sufferer, whose trembling lips were struggling with the still beloved name!

And, at last, Clara's quick ear caught the faltered accents: "Little Paul!"

Swift as the rush of angel's wings, the American Princess sped away upon her loving errand.

And, when Marie Wraxine opened her fast-glazing eyes for the last time, she saw that stranger sister standing there before her, with the child clasped in her sheltering arms.

"Je m'en vais!" faltered the lustrous-eyed Marie. "C'en est fini! Mon fils—le pauvre Paul Zastrow!"

"Mine forever," cried Clara, as she strained the child to her bosom. "He shall be a prince among men—my own—my very own!"

And then, Kazia Petroffsky stole away the helpless burden as the young wife caught Marie Wraxine's hands, now chilling with death's approach!

A smile not of this world lit up the dying woman's face as, with a last supreme effort, she clasped her

guardian angel's neck within the circle of her helpless arms!

"Dien vous benisse!" came softly from the pallid lips, and when they laid the tired head back upon the pillow there was a gentle sigh—one quick gasp—and beautiful Marie Wraxine's eyes, glazed in death, fondly fixed themselves in unutterable tenderness upon the woman who had taken upon herself the sacred burden of motherhood.

It was the veteran Oberweiler who led Clara Zastrow away into the room where Kazia Petroffsky clung to the babe as if the mother's call might rob them of her hostage to the Goddess of Sorrows!

And, when the old German Doctor laid the wreath of white roses upon the wasted bosom of the White Lady, the praying nuns had crossed those nerveless hands in peace upon the loving but pulseless heart!

"All is gone of her burden of pain and sorrow," muttered the physician. "Let there be only love and peace around her fatherless child—the monument of her devotion—her legacy! For, this was one of the finer souls—true beyond the world's false laws—and now resting in the fathomless mercy of God!"

CHAPTER XV.

PAYING THE PRICE.

Two days after the death of the unhappy Marie Wraxine, the Princess Zastrow sat in the priest's little "best room," listening mechanically to the few words of Baron Serge Mohrendorf's message.

Father Anastasius, his sad eyes lit up with an affectionate interest, leaned forward in his great armchair.

The American Princess was keenly intent upon the young secretary's words, and yet, her head turned toward the next room whenever the chirping voice of little Paul was heard.

"I have now fulfilled my uncle's imperative orders, and shall hasten on, by Rovno, direct to St. Peters-

burg! Poor Marie rests in the vault here until you may confer with my uncle. Father Anastasius has my uncle's telegrams to guide him—the duplicate of my own. I would advise you to go at once to Paris with Madame Obranovitch. Father Anastasius and the child will be needed there also. One of the Russian Sisters will go with you, as the legal custody of this helpless babe is now in the priest only. Then, trust to my uncle's wisdom for your course!"

"My establishment at Nice!" murmured the Princess.

"It will still be the voice of scandal if you allow Consul Obranovitch to pay off the servants and simply appoint a carekeeper. You can telegraph Obranovitch to send on your maid with your own luggage; and bring the butler, too, on to Paris. If you choose, you can drop the villa, or sub-let it, before next winter."

"I never wish to see Nice again!" sadly murmured the unhappy wife.

"Then, let the Consul quietly dispose of the villa for the remainder of your lease," gravely replied Baron Serge. "I will give the courier every order for your careful transit. You must go direct by Strasburg and Nancy, to Paris. Once in Paris, the Ambassador will direct your every movement, and I—at St. Petersburg—will obey his orders."

"It is well! I am ready!" said Clara Zastrow.

Her troubled heart recalled the Ambassador's fatherly words in the confidential letter just at hand: "Your interests and those of the child are now strangely bound up together! Come to me—you shall be a guest of the Embassy until you choose your temporary home. My widowed cousin, the Countess Grunow, will receive you here, and I will go to my *piédestal* à terre at Fontainebleau. Remember, when you are in the same city with your husband it will stifle even the meanest gossip."

There was but one heart-wrench when the voyagers left the priest's modest home for the station, where the private railway carriage waited them.

Motherly Kazia Petroffsky clasped little Paul to her generous bosom.

" You are to come to me for a six months' visit, Matushka!" brightly said the Princess Zastrow. " So, you will not long be separated from your little bundle of trouble."

And, Serge Mohrendorf was already closeted with the thoughtful Foreign Secretary, Monsieur de Giers, on the Neva, when, at the Gare Saint Lazare, the silver-haired Ambassador led the young Princess to the carriage where the venerable Countess Grunow awaited her stranger guest.

It was two days later, when Count Ivan sat alone in his private cabinet with the young American, who had already learned to gaze fearlessly into the old noble's fatherly eyes.

Madame Obranovitch was already established with the child and a Russian Sister at the Montainebleau house, the modest villa where Prascovie Zastrow had fought out her last bitter sorrows alone.

" Before I call in Father Anastasius, my child," said the old Count, " I must tell you that your future status, the child's interests, and all which the Emperor's kindly aid can grant you, depends now upon your strict incognito until such time as Prince Paul Zastrow may submit to reasonable control or else mend his insane methods of life! Alas! I fear only the strong hand of the law will ever restrain him, and, as it is beyond my power to control or protect him, I must do my duty by you."

Clara Zastrow, robed in her somber black, bowed her graceful head in silence.

" I have directed all the little belongings of the poor mother at Dresden to be carefully arranged and then sealed up for their preservation, so that one day her son may know of the tenderness which made his cradle an altar of chastened love! Before I call Anastasius in, look at this face!"

The Count placed a picture in the Princess Zastrow's hands.

" Beautiful—how beautiful!" murmured Clara, in rapture.

" Fatal beauty—woman's most dangerous dower," sighed the old noble. " It is Marie, the poor woman

whose eyes you closed in death. But taken before the curse came upon her—before she paid the price of those hours of fatal error."

It was indeed the Queen of Pearls, in all the brilliant beauty which shone out under the roses of Rovno.

"May God forgive the man who wrecked her life!" murmured the golden-haired American.

"Amen!" solemnly said the Ambassador, as he led the old priest into the room.

"We will speak English," soberly said Mohrendorf; "for then, no one can catch a syllable! I have learned a lesson in the detection and discharge of that moucharde Baptiste, for now I trust no one—save my own flesh and blood, or else our loyal old Russian hearts, bred up in wholesome poverty. The whole age is rotten with the vices of the idle rich—the gilded waterflies of fashion's festering pools."

And when the long recital was done, when Clara Zastrow had traced the unhappy Marie from the darkened home on the Place Michel to the narrow niche in the crypt at Dresden, her heart was filled with an infinite pity!

The old priest sat with a bundle of papers clutched in his feeble fingers, spellbound in following, step by step, the downward course which had led Demetrius Kriloff's child—the patrician Helène Souvaroff's daughter—to an outcast's grave in an alien land!

And Clara Zastrow blankly repeated the empty title which had been forfeited by the betrayal of an unguarded soul! "Madame la Générale Baronne Marie Wraxine."

She knew now all the sad history of Prascovie Zastrow's life—and of her own husband's forfeited oath!

How base—how low in mind—this baleful Prince Charming!

How poor and thin the shield of his honor, to the woman who had listened to his lying tongue—the poor girl who had given up more than life—who had only ceased to cry "Paul! Come back to me!" when her tongue was stilled in death!

And the child—the pledge of the mother's love, the

badge of the father's unutterable shame—here was a sacred trust!

"It is this record, my child," gravely concluded the Ambassador, "which bids me shield you from your husband's duplicity—and also guard your fortune from his insane rapacity! I must tell you that in the last month I have vainly begged him to show a single spark of manhood! General Wraxine is dead—there were no legal proceedings after the flight of Marie; the law presumes the child to be born in wedlock. Poor Michel Wraxine—he died both insane and penniless! But, the child inherits his name! The law of the Empire guards it! By a strange accident, little Paul will also inherit the fortune which the Baroness Xenie Karovitch stole from the hoodwinked Marie. I have already sent a certified copy of the baptismal certificate on to St. Petersburg, and Kalomine and his dissolute wife will now have to turn in to the Orphans' Court all the property forfeited by Marie Wraxine in leaving Russia—the whole contents of the house on the Place Michel! For, whether born in wedlock or not, the child is the heir of the mother!"

"Thank God!" murmured the woman who had pledged her faith to the dying mother. "But," she faltered, as the crimson flush of shame reddened her cheeks, "the child is Paul Zastrow's son!"

"True," sadly said Ivan Mohrendorf, "and it is for denying this that your husband may forfeit his rank, name, and standing! For I sent for him and told him of General Wraxine's death—of the old soldier's penury—of the misery of the dying mother and the helpless babe! I begged him to adopt it and so give it his name—the only atonement a man of honor could make! The Russian law allows this, but, only with your consent!"

"And—what said Paul?" eagerly cried the young Princess.

"He defied me, coarsely denied the child, and called the mother an adventuress!" slowly said Count Mohrendorf. "It is for this, that I sent Serge on to St. Petersburg to counteract Alexandre Kalomine's schemes of sly bribery for Paul's pardon! It is now a case of the Czar and the Foreign Minister against the

finance coterie and the corrupt Grand Duke Anatole!"

"The end of the struggle?" breathlessly queried Clara Zastrow.

"Paul will be proscribed—driven from reputable Europe—and his name will perish from the earth! He is the last of the Zastrows!" sadly cried the Ambassador. "And his father, though headlong, was a loyal hero; his mother, a brave-hearted angel—a woman whose noble eyes blessed me as she died in my arms!"

There was a speaking silence.

"Is there no way that I can compel Paul to acknowledge his child?" softly whispered the young American.

"Alas! no. He defied me, and has even threatened to murder Serge!" said Ivan Mohrendorf. "I have been obliged to have two of the secret police shadow him."

"And, if he should never consent to give the babe his honest name?" cried Clara, with flashing eyes.

"Then, justice can not be done, unless Paul should die, and you then, adopt the child by law!" was the old man's hopeless rejoinder. "It is your right alone!"

"Could I not buy his compliance?" demanded Clara, blushing to utter a thing so base.

"He is in the hands of a band of usurers, Jewish sharks, and the foul undercurrent of all the villains of Paris!" frankly said the Count. "Wait—wait—he will soon exhaust his credit, borrowing on the chances of your future liberality! Then he may be forced to make terms with me, but only if you are firm! Until he has ruined himself he would demand at least the half of your fortune as the fee of his cowardly villainy!"

The Princess Clara sprang to her feet. "I am an American, free born and no man's slave! I swear now, before high Heaven, that I will guard my wealth for this innocent child's sake—that I will not yield; and I will wait until I am free to adopt the boy myself—for he is now sacred to me—by the promise given to the mother whose eyes closed gazing upon the babe clinging to my breast! Little Paul shall yet bear his own

name, and, if I am to be the Princess Zastrow, then he shall be my son!"

"There was that in the beautiful woman's womanly face which carried away the old noble far back into his younger days of Life and Love!

Dropping on his knee, he kissed her hand as if she were a crowned queen!

"You are a Princess by God's holy chrism of nature's nobility! I will serve you, guard you, and protect you! Listen! There is one way left—at the very last—a last resort! The Czar can issue a patent to little Paul to bear the name of Zastrow—on his mere Imperial prerogative. My master has offered me one or two vain dignities! Of what use to hang a garland upon the dying tree! He will do this for your sake—for my sake—for the sake of Prascovie Zastrow, the noblest woman whom I ever met, except yourself! Oh! Would to God that she could have folded you but once to her motherly heart!"

The old diplomatist brushed away unbidden tears!

Father Anastasius had now deposited all the original documents of Paul's birth, and of the Princess Clara's formal reception into the Church, with the archives of the Embassy, and, guarded by the Countess Grunow, Clara Zastrow made a holy pilgrimage to the grave of the woman who had died for the love of her heartless son.

"If you should see your reckless husband," sadly said Count Mohrendorf, "remember that my attaché is with you, and you are guarded by the Swiss of the Embassy and the two footmen. They have their orders. For your protection, there are also two policemen, who never leave Prince Paul Zastrow, when he appears in the streets."

And then, the noble girl hid her tears behind a somber veil, for the idol lay shattered before her, and the ashes of life were thickly strewn around her desolate hearthstone.

It was while returning from Fontainebleau, through the Bois de Boulogne, that a fatal sense of nearness caused the Princess Clara to lift her head as a victoria swept by.

There was an exclamation, a half shout from Prince Paul—but only a mocking sneer from la Racowitzza, who laughed insolently in the face of her American rival—“*la femme honnête!*”

And then, that night, as the white stars swept over gay Paris, Princess Clara Zastrow, on her knees, vowed to be true to herself and to the motherless child who had nestled all those afternoon hours in her loving arms.

A week after the unhappy rencontre in the Bois, Madame la Princesse Clara Zastrow was still a guest at the Imperial Russian Embassy.

True, Justine Duprez had arrived with the luggage of the young millionairess, but the wary Count Mohrendorf absolutely forbade the Princess Zastrow from entering into possession of the charming little mansion on the Champs Elysees, which, by an extreme good fortune, had been secured from a noblewoman of rank ordered to Egypt, for the relief of her weak lungs.

Though Ivan Mohrendorf was brave beyond all limits of caution, his daily reports from the Commissaire de Police caused him to accept a personal escort of two disguised agents de police on his own daily voyages to and fro, for the Ambassador delighted in his little villa at Fontainebleau.

“*Le pauvre Prince Paul est entièrement fou!*” sadly said the French official. “He is only surrounded now by usurers, swordsmen, gamblers, and escrocs! His unpaid I. O. U.’s have banished him from the clubs, and—he is in the clutches of la Racowitzza! She will never let him go as long as he has left a jewel or a single sou!”

“Can she not be arrested?” gloomily said the Ambassador.

“Alas!” replied the philosophic Gaul. “Her trade is a time-honored one, as old as our civilization—older—even a classic crime. She keeps within the law! But there will soon be a tragedy! Beware, Monsieur le Count; and, above all, protect this charming American, whose life he has clouded!”

It was easy for the Ambassador to insist upon Clara Zastrow’s further stay at the Embassy, and, warned by

the Commissaire de Police, the Count retained Baron Serge on the Neva, awaiting the final fall of the curtain!

It was the only way to baffle Paul Zastrow's mad-dening day-dream, his scheme to murder the Ambassador's only heir.

The cheap revenge of the baffled brute was to couple his girl-wife's name with the absent young noble in foul scandal.

And, even the base following who were eating up the forty thousand francs revolted at this patent villainy.

"Tenez!" said one, "the little American would do well to buy this low brute off for a few hundred thousand francs! Only a year's income!"

They knew not the spring-steel nerve of the brave young wife, for, secure in her own quiet mind, she looked above the clouds of the present to see the pointing hand of the martyred Prascovie Zastrow, a monition of Honor and Duty!

And, while Paul Zastrow's blazing red star sunk lower in the midnight blackness of Paris, his loyal wife clasped to her bosom the child of the woman who had died for him, a living pledge, binding her soul to the suffering woman for whom Prascovie Zastrow had wrecked the last of her fortune.

Close upon the heels of Paul Zastrow now followed the secret police, and the spies of the alarmed money-lenders haunted his footsteps! The light-minded following fell off from his side, for there was a red danger signal ahead now!

A second week had dragged away, and the young Princess Zastrow only heard one recurrent answer from the anxious Ambassador's lips!

"Wait—wait, my child! The Czar's Privy Council are making a secret investigation of this whole affair, from the very moment of Demetrius Kriloff's death!

And Director Alexandre Kalomine has been strictly ordered to show the vouchers for every single rouble which transferred the great Maison Kriloff to a banded gang of usurious thieves. Remember, I am by your side to guard you, and the Embassy is Russian terri-

tory! You are at home now! Trust to me! Trust to the Czar!"

It was a sparkling January afternoon when Prince Paul Zastrow rode his Hungarian charger—a present from Prince Stahremberg—at the side of Madame Racowitz'a victoria. The Bois was almost deserted. The songstress, muffled in richest sables, eyed furtively the young Count de Santa Marina, who now cast envious glances at Zastrow, across the carriage. This rich neophyte was the rising sun! The woods of the Bois de Boulogne were swept by a fresh, biting breeze, and the two horsemen with difficulty held back their chafing steeds.

"I must soon give Paul his congè, for with him 'les eaux sont basses'!" thought the singer. "This Brazilian has millions—millions! But, it is a pity!" Magda Racowitz'a compared the two men.

It was Hyperion to a Satyr, but she remembered the famous necklace of emeralds en cabochon, which Santa Marina had promised her!

It had once shone on the swanlike neck of the Empress Eugenie!

And so, when the Brazilian, his eyes glowering at Paul Zastrow, leaned toward her and hoarsely whispered: "You dine with me to-night at my apartment?" the heartless Magyar smiled faintly. "With the emeralds?" she murmured.

"Yes!" hoarsely replied the Portuguese Midas, as his horse suddenly plunged and curvetted!

"Holà!" cried the Count, as two mounted gens d'armes and a cavalier in plain clothes rode boldly at Prince Paul Zastrow, the leader waving a paper.

An oath escaped the desperate Russian, as, sharply wheeling his horse, he dashed headlong into the wood, his horse plunging off at right angles, with the three strangers in a hot pursuit:

The frightened coachman had pulled up the team, and the Racowitz'a shuddered as there was a warning yell and then a sickening crash!

"What is it?" breathlessly demanded the Hungarian wanton, as Count Santa Marina rode gingerly back. The new lover's face was ashen pale.

"Zastrow has broken his back, it seems!" excitedly cried the Brazilian tourist. "He rode off a cliff, thirty feet high, 'en plein air'! They were after him to arrest him for the forgery of a letter of credit, and swindling the bank out of a hundred thousand francs! Come away! It is no place for us! Voilà un scandale!"

Before the terrified woman could reply, the coachman was lashing the horses frantically along, and half an hour later the diva safely entered the Porte de Neuilly. Santa Marina's groom at once disappeared with his horse, and the two sybarites then drove merrily away to their ortolans and "filet aux truffles!"

"We must know nothing!" said the Count, and the complaisant Magda Racowitza answered him with her gleaming eyes.

Lying on a wretched pallet, in a park guardian's hut, the senseless Russian adventurer lay awaiting the arrival of the ambulance.

The evening shadows were falling when they lifted the helpless form.

A strange doctor had hurriedly administered brandy and an opiate; but, callous as the crowd of strangers were, their hearts were touched to see the magnificent fabric of a peerless man lying there, a pitiful ruin, even in the days of his high youth.

It was Paul Zastrow's habitual courtesy which caused him to smile faintly and say: "Thank you! Go on! I feel nothing!"

He had never spoken before—since the ringing revolver shot which killed his peerless charger, rang out through the lonely woods!

And so, on a door wrenched away from the hut, the patrician soldier, the husband of a millionairess, was carried away to the charity ambulance which conveyed him to the Maison Municipale de Santé.

Late that night, the Ambassador conferred with the startled priest, for all Paris was ringing with the crime—the attempted arrest, and the fearful accident!

"He will never stand upright again!" sadly said the physician of the Embassy, in his private report to the Count.

And then, the Doctor sadly answered the unspoken question of Mohrendorf's eyes.

"Three or four months, at most! He is paralyzed! It is a hideous ending of a wasted life!"

It was the finale of the hideous tragedy of a blasted career.

The old Ambassador paced the cabinet in deep thought! At last he spoke:

"Let her sleep to-night in peace! Sorrows travel rapidly enough! Thank God that the Princess Prascovie did not live to see her son, a criminal, on the way to the galleys! But—Death—the great Paymaster—Death settles all debts! It is indeed horrible!"

The Princess Clara Zastrow needed no monitor of misfortune the next morning, when the Countess Grunow led her into the Ambassador's study.

Her quick eye caught the significant group.

The grave Ambassador was there, with the fatherly Anastasius, the Embassy's physician, a distinguished-looking stranger, and the Commissaire de Police.

"Tell me all," she said, simply. "Is he dead?"

And then, she listened more in sorrow than in anger to the whole recital.

"He will never speak again! He is a helpless wreck!" said the French physician.

"Take me to him—at once!" cried Clara Zastrow. "I am his wife, and, he needs me now!"

As she went away for her brief preparations the whole circle stood in silent awe, as when an Empress sweeps by her line of courtiers.

Two weeks later, Madame la Princesse Clara Zastrow was quietly installed in her temporary home on the great avenue.

Her youthful beauty seemed to have fled, but on her pale and resolute face shone out the high soul which still animated her girlish frame.

Old soldier as Mohrendorf was, he dared not be present when Clara Zastrow entered the sick-room with the little Paul in her arms!

Countess Grunow told the old noble of the agony of speechless despair shining out in Paul Zastrow's eyes as he gazed upon that fair woman, sobbing there with

Marie Kriloff's child nestling upon her stainless breast!

"You women are braver than any of us, after all!" muttered the Ambassador. "I am glad that I have lived to know this one heroic soul!"

Some potent influence had stilled the clamor of the whole mocking Parisian press, and there seemed to be a veil of the Temple now shutting out the Woman's Kingdom where the Princess Zastrow reigned, from the mad hurly-burly of Paris!

The February blasts were shaking the bare branches of the deserted Bois when Father Anastasius took Clara Zastrow aside for his adieu.

"I must now be gone," he said. "There are grave duties calling me home, and—nothing left for me here! Only to give you my blessing, and to say that I shall send Kazia to you for six months to relieve you of the care of the child, until—until—" The old man's lip trembled and he turned away in silence.

But, he was charged with a last sacred mission from the Ambassador.

It was a delicate courtesy which had caused the Count to leave the wife alone in these last days with the helpless man, whose pleading eyes alone told the story of his infinite and unavailing regret!

Too late—too late! by God's mysterious providence, for aught but the repentance of the soul, and that horrible silent introspection of these last months of a wasted life!

Each morning, a secretary called for orders, and one day in the week, the Countess Grunow took charge of the ménage, while the Princess drove out into the crisp, spring air!

But never did her carriage pass the gateways of the fatal Bois de Boulogne—the avenues of gilded vice—the parade-ground of insolent iniquity.

Two of the patient Russian Sisters now watched over the unfortunate Paul Zastrow, and the two men who sat ever ready in the sick-room, hardened as they were to suffering, often wept in Clara Zastrow's absence, when the childless Russian nun held Paul Zastrow's rosy babe down to kiss the pale lips of the father who

had denied his kith and kin for the sake of wretched mammon!

This unheralded tenderness touched Count Ivan Mohrendorf so that even his own rugged heart melted, and often, in Clara's absence, he leaned over Paul Zastrow's couch in a fatherly pity.

But, one strange absence was noted by the Princess Clara.

She knew that Serge Mohrendorf had returned to Paris, and yet, the loyal friend had never approached the house of sorrows.

On this last day, Father Anastasius laid before the Princess certain papers, the receipt of which astounded her!

The first was an Imperial decree restoring the Maison Kriloff, entire, to the ownership of Marie Wraxine's child, subject only to the repayment of a few hundred thousand roubles, for which a sinking fund of the rents would soon clear the vast property long before little Paul's majority.

The personal property was already listed and deposited to the child's credit, in the Orphans' Court.

Princess Clara started in surprise as the priest read a rescript appointing her to be the sole guardian of the person of the Prince Paul Zastrow, an imbecile and hopeless invalid.

An order accepting the adoption of the infant Paul Michaelovitch Wraxine as the legal heir of the Prince Paul Zastrow, with a patent changing the child's name, was accompanied with the legal guardianship of the child, duly granted to the Princess Clara Zastrow.

And, lastly, the estates near Kief were relieved by order, from Alexandre Kalmonie's mortgages, and their past forfeiture annulled on the future payment of six hundred thousand roubles, principal without interest, to be taken from the income of the lands.

The vast estate was set aside, in the care of the courts, for the Princess Zastrow and her adopted son.

Clara Zastrow fled away to her room, in happy tears, when the priest said: "And now, before I go, I have the last solemn offices of the Church to perform!"

Only the two kneeling nuns knew that, after Father

Petroffsky had blessed the repentant man, he had held up before his eyes, printed in large script, the details of the Czar's disposition of the interests of the helpless babe.

A long, tender, silent adieu was that in which Father Anastasius said an eternal farewell to the helpless man, in whose eyes shone all the light of a redeemed soul!

Much marveled the gay throng at the Gare de Saint Lazare to see the princely Ambassador of Russia embraced the faded old priest whom he had brought, in stately ceremony, to the station!

But, even greater ceremony was shown, a week later, when the simple-minded Kazia Petroffsky was conducted by the Countess Grunow to the miniature palace on the Champs Elysees.

It was the clear-headed Madame Obranovitch who had taken away with her Justine Duprez and the smooth-faced Adolph Schlitz on her return to Nice. She had quickly recognized their duplicity.

It was well done, for the two cormorants soon fell into pleasant places; they adroitly fastened upon the volatile Magda Racowitz, who had taken the young Brazilian away to the Riviera to pillage him at her leisure.

The stripping of such a golden fool was the one lucky event of a lifetime!

While the Princess Clara still wondered at Baron Serge Mohrendorf's absence, she was forced to acknowledge a debt of eternal gratitude to him; for the Ambassador at last told her of how his resolute nephew had trapped the spy Casimir Kinsky, and had terrified into a confession the now reputable Berlin banker, Matthias Weinstock!

Weinstock, for a secret consideration, had betrayed Kinsky, and had, at last, established the robbery of the dead Corps Commander by the fugitive servant! And so, Paul Zastrow's name was cleared of the meanest crime of pillaging his Commander!

In far-away Siberia, Kinsky deeply regretted trusting to his Hebrew confederate; and yet, Weinstock was happy, for a second douceur, had obtained the evidence

from him which freed the Maison Kriloff from the iniquitous clutches of Director Alexandre Kalomine.

It was only when the Grand Duke Anatole was suddenly ordered to the Trans Caspian for five years, that Madame Barbe Anykoff disappeared from the Neva; but, returning staff officers, over their cups, told merry tales of a well-preserved beauty who lorded it over the Grand Duke's headquarters at Samarcand.

When the great defensive works at Rovno were at last, finished a quarrel of the Necker syndicate with the Director Alexandre Kalomine over certain undivided profits, laid bare the swindling methods which had induced the Baron Kalomine to suddenly resign his dominating position in the Imperial Bank, and to flee to the social caldron of Paris, and carry off with him the still entrancing Baroness Xenie!

The doors of the Winter Palace had been rigorously shut to her since the disgrace and practical banishment of the Grand Duke Anatole!

It was with a shudder of fear that Kalomine listened to a veiled hint from the Russian Ambassador, when he reached the gay city of Lutetia.

The fair Xenie pouted, but a quick flank march to Brussels anchored the guilty pair in hiding for some years.

Kalomine well understood the message of Count Mohrendorf as to the "unhealthy air of Paris!" And so, he wisely "moved on"!

When the inevitable end came, before the wood roses were spangling the copses of the Bois de Boulogne, Paul Zastrow breathed his last sigh as unexpectedly as the flickering lamp suddenly blazes up a moment, and then, comes the total eclipse of darkness!

And yet, he, with an unspoken agony of repentance, vainly tried to send across the Gulf of Silence, which parted them, his prayer for forgiveness to the noble woman who gazed down upon him, and his blessing to the child whom he had thrust out of his heart!

Only the two Russian nuns, who prayed beside the inanimate form, knew that their kindly hands had held up the child before him, in that last, long vigil of the last drowsy afternoon; that they had shown before his

eyes the slate which was the only means of communication, and that upon it was plainly traced the words:

“ Prince Paul Zastrow ! ”

The gentle-hearted women sobbed in delight, for they saw in the kindling eyes that he knew at last that his child would not be robbed of the fatal birthright of a proud name, only dishonored by himself! And in that chastened peace of heart, the splendid adventurer breathed his last, facing death without a tremor.

“ *Tout Paris* ” held its breath for a moment, when the Russian Ambassador buried the unfortunate Paul Zastrow, in stately ceremony, for the dignified sorrow and unbroken mystery of his death had piqued all the curious loungers in *Vanity Fair*!

The disappearance of “ *ce charmante Princesse Americaine* ” was widely deplored by those who still lingered to catch the golden crumbs of the young widow’s enormous fortune.

It seemed, after all adverse comment, that the fortune was veritable, for the Baron Serge Mohrendorf, with the banker of the Embassy and a committee of the Clubs, had paid the widespread debts of the dead noble, to the very last farthing!

And, after all, there was some regret, for the Russian Embassy had formally announced the rehabilitation of the exile’s name, but, only after his demise.

“ *C’était un brave gaillard, celui là,* ” murmured the astonished creditors; “ but, a stormy-hearted fellow ! ”

And, really, only the good woman who had kept the secrets of that modest villa at Fontainebleau divided with the Ambassador the touching secret that Paul Zastrow slept honorably in death, beside the tomb of his noble-hearted mother, for the lightly chiseled name, “ Mertens,” had now disappeared, and the unforgotten woman’s marble sarcophagus bore the arms of the Zastrows and her own revered name. And, the mantle of oblivion soon descended upon the baleful memory of the wild-hearted Russian.

It was five years after the Count Ivan Mohrendorf had retired from the splendid dignity of the Embassy at Paris, when he emerged from the chosen retirement of his vast chateau in the Urals.

It was when the high and mighty Emperor Nicholas II, was crowned in pomp the Czar of all the Russias, in the White City of Moscow.

When the Grand Duke Serge gave over the keys of the Holy City to his Imperial nephew, when all the magnificent nobles of Russia were assembled to honor the mighty potentate, the old Princess Crayekowski, staggering under the weight of jewels and faded brocade, turned to a neighboring beauty, the grandchild of one of her schoolmates at the Catherine Institute:

"Who is that golden-haired beauty, my child?" the aged devotee of fashion eagerly demanded.

The envious Russian answered:

"This is the newly-risen star, the Baroness Mohrendorf. You know, Tante, she is still the Princess Zastrow in her own right, for, she had married that wild young Paul Zastrow who died in Paris. She is an American, enormously rich, and by and by, they will have all the old Count's vast wealth! See how the old man dotes upon her! Baron Serge has just been made our Ambassador to Austria, and he will be a Count of the Empire when his uncle dies!"

"There was a child!" mused the old patrician, who was, even in her dotage, a walking social directory.

"An adopted child," said the young beauty, as she gazed in envy and astonishment at Clara Mohrendorf's wonderful jewels. "It is the little Prince Paul Zastrow! They say that he has a palace of his own in far-away America, in the region where the mountains are all gold and silver! But, Bishop Anastasius Petroffsky is soon to bring him home to enter the Page School! The little Baron Serge is but a year old—their only child."

"This lucky beauty has everything that heart can desire!" the old dowager sighed as she gazed on the noble pair when the stalwart Serge, covered with gleaming orders, bowed with his radiant wife before the pale-faced and troubled Czar!

"An American princess! It seems like a romance!" murmured the old woman. "She is as beautiful as a star!"

(THE END)

J.W.

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